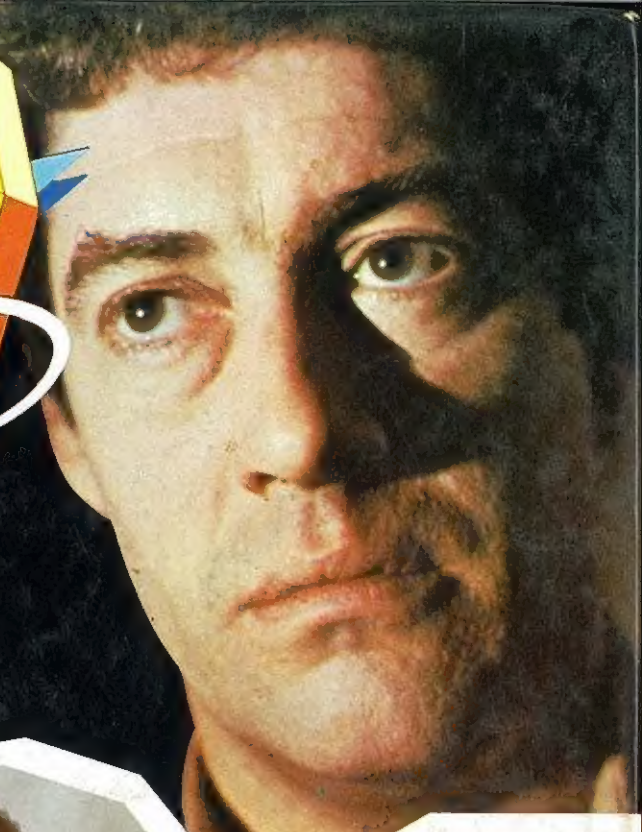
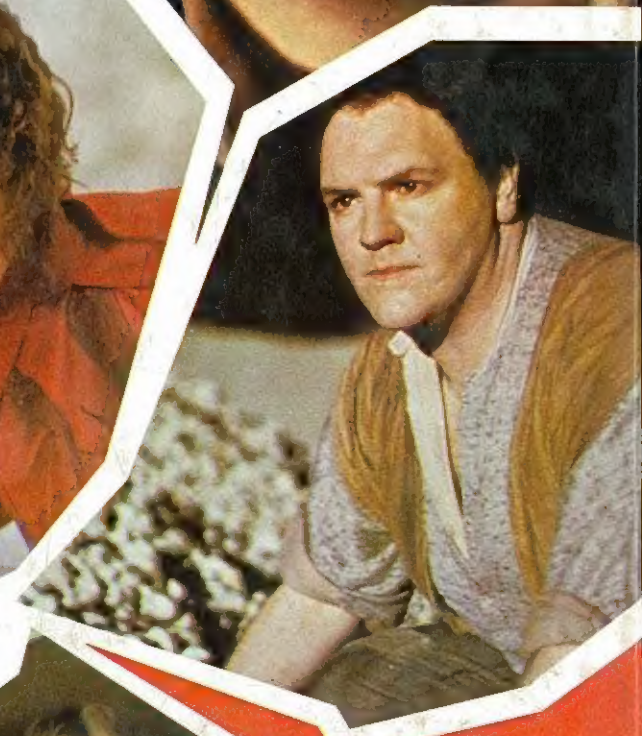
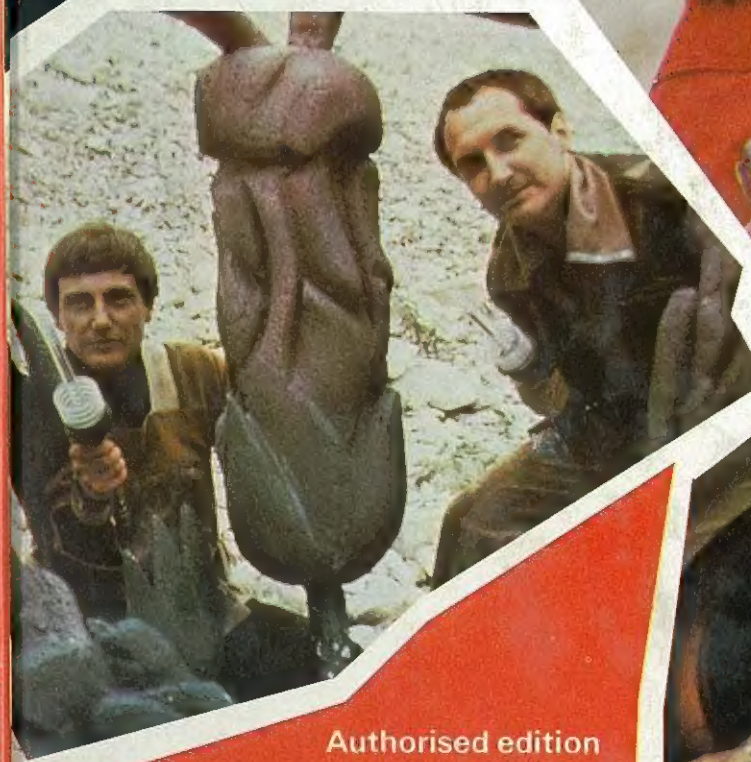
Terry Nation's

BLAKE'S 7

annual 1979







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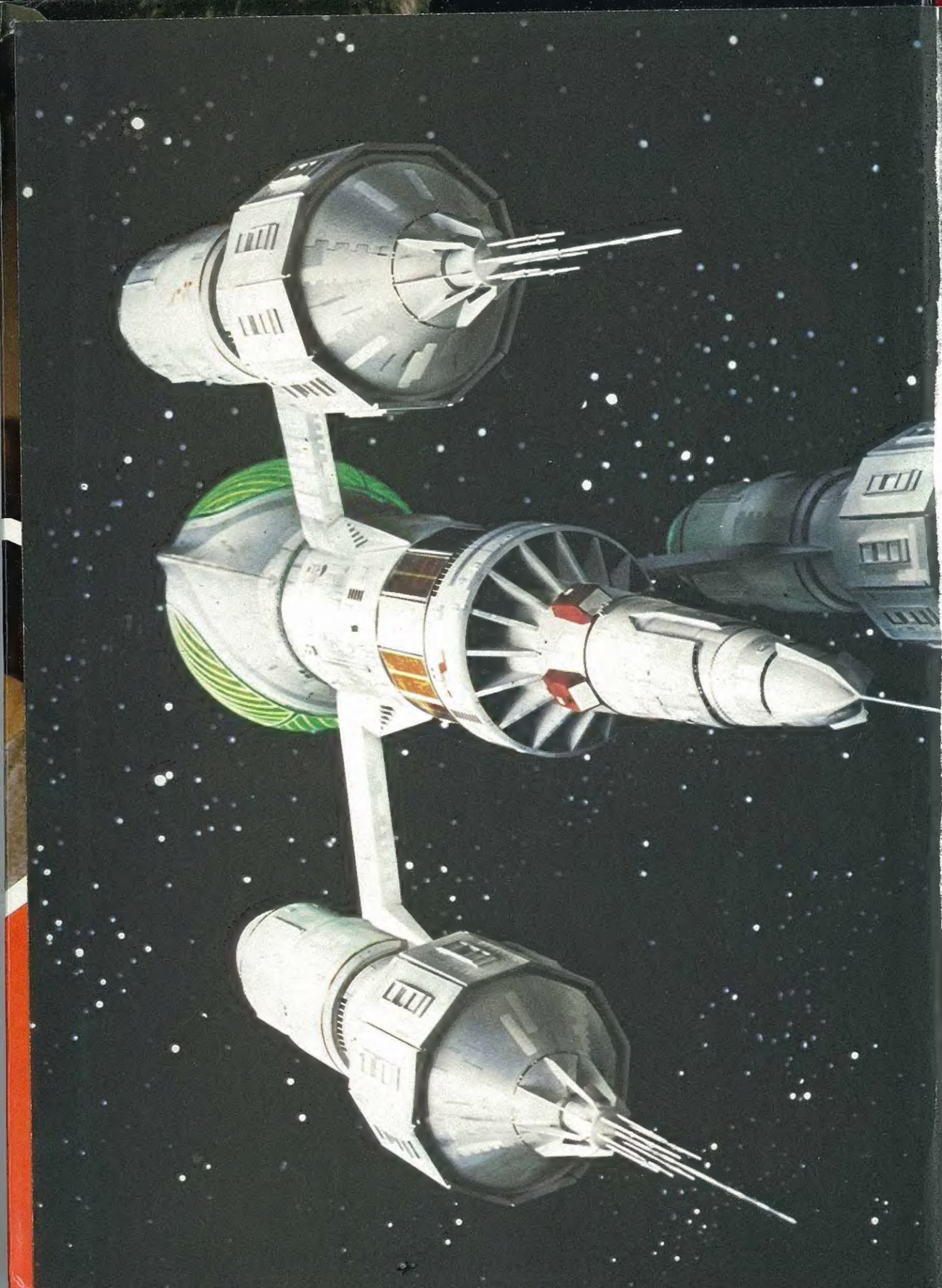

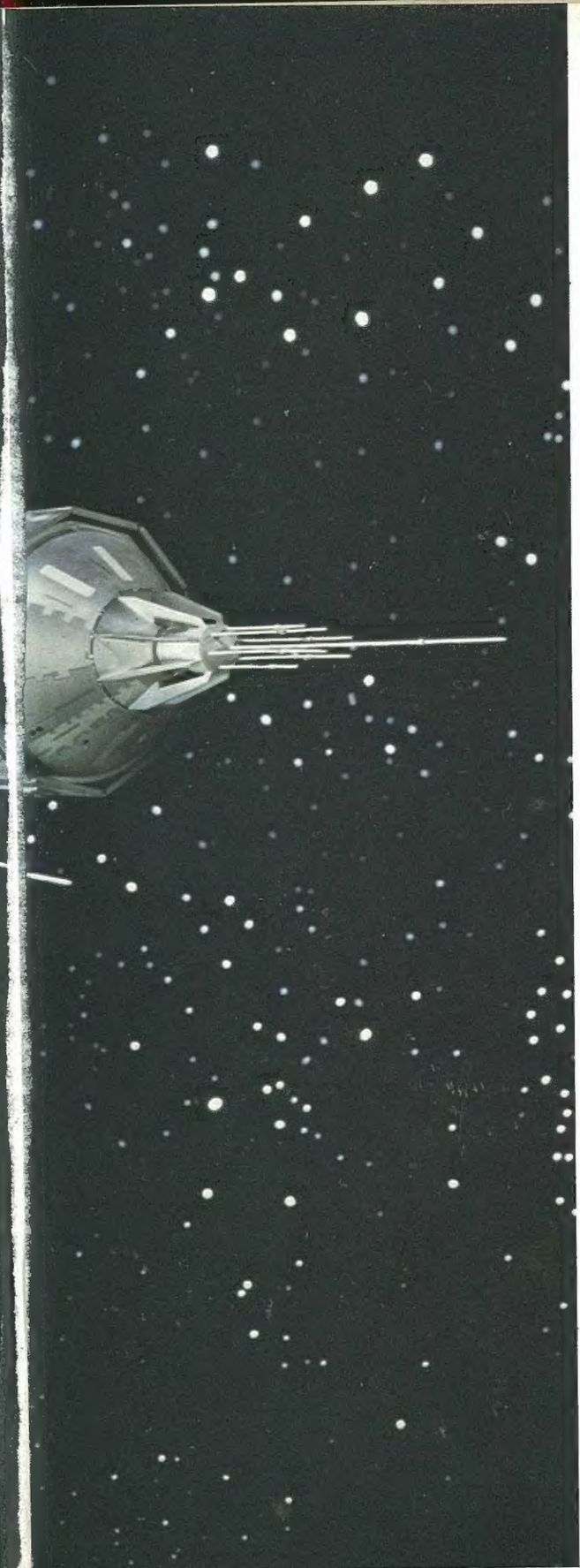

ANNUAL 1979

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BLAKE'S 7

The random assembly of embezzlers, thieves, murderers and revolutionaries that make up Blake's 7 are all fugitives in space, their frail alliance fortified by the knowledge that each one of them has been marked down for extermination by the Federation. But who are these men and women who are prepared to fight to the death for their freedom?

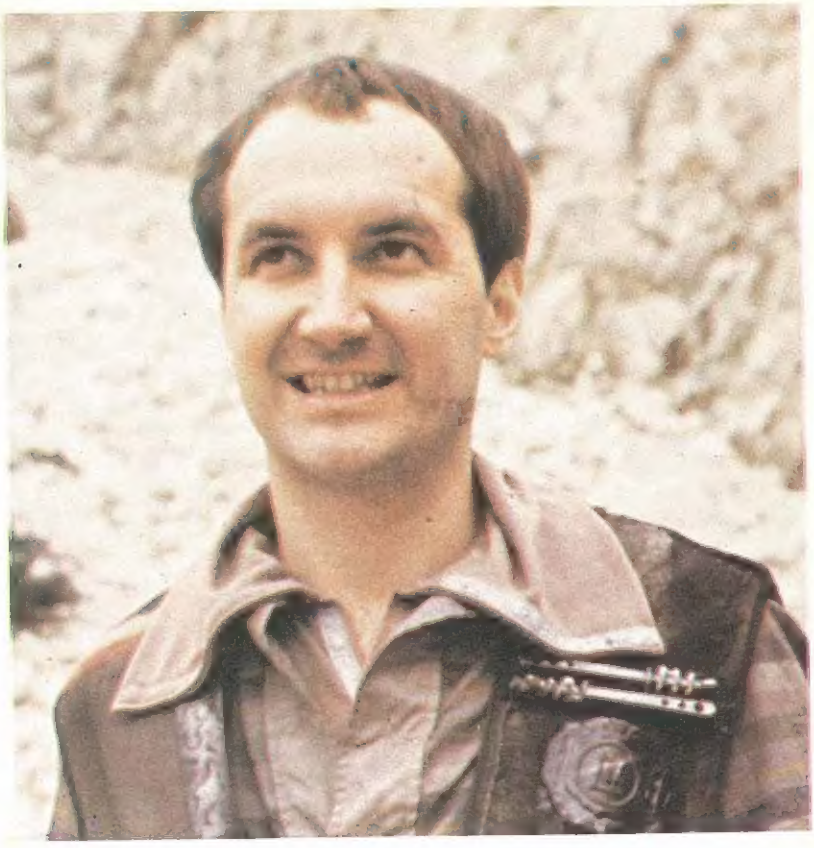
Roj Blake is the leader, cast in the classic heroic mould. After the Federation subjected him to their memory erasure techniques he was a human vegetable, until he became unwittingly involved with a subversive group, and was sentenced to life imprisonment on the penal planet Cygnus Alpha. Ever since he led the escape in the Liberator he has been dedicated to the destruction of the Federation. It is his personality and will that keeps his crew of misfits together. It is his determination that takes them into and out of hundreds of adventures.

Avon is the most difficult member of Blake's 7. He is highly intelligent and a technological genius. His dry, almost bitter outlook often leads him into confrontation with Blake, but he realises that if he left the 7 it would be just a matter of time before the Federation found him and put him to death. He was sent to Cygnus Alpha after using computers to embezzle hundreds of millions of Federation money.

Jenna is a lady with many remarkable qualities, not the least of which is her exceptional ability to face

the many dangers of space without turning a hair. She is stunningly beautiful and is one of the finest space pilots in the business. She was sent to Cygnus Alpha as a result of her activities in the most successful band of inter-planetary smugglers in Federation history.

Gan is a man of enormous physical strength and mental stability. He is a man of simple tastes and strong convictions. He saw his home planet Zephron destroyed by the Federation, and killed several Federation troops in an effort to stop their onslaught. Before being sent to Cygnus Alpha he had a 'limiter' implanted in his brain that stops him from killing anything.



Vila is the joker in the pack, an easy-going man with a liking for the idle way of life. As a thief he is second to none, and it was his skill in this field that led him to being sent to Cygnus Alpha. No locking device in the universe is safe against his skills. He is a master of sleight of hand, and is a happy and self confessed coward.

Cally is the other female of the seven and no less beautiful than Jenna. Her telepathic powers have helped the others out of many a tight spot. She comes from the planet Saurian Major, where she was an active member of the resistance movement. Her complete disregard for her own safety often places her companions in dangerous situations.

And the seventh?
Zen is the speaking computer that controls all the systems on the Liberator. Zen is a masterpiece of design, created by alien intelligences far more advanced than those on earth. At times Zen seems almost human, and acts as Blake's ready and willing servant.

CRYSTAL GAZING

Roj Blake rubbed his eyes sleepily as he answered the call to the flight deck of the Liberator. He had been dreaming of earth – strange dreams with gaps that he knew he could never fill – when he received the emergency call from Jenna Stannis, the pilot of the big spaceship.

By the time he reached the flight deck he was more alert. "What's happened, Jenna?" he asked, taking a seat beside her.

"More trouble from our friend Colonel Travis, I'm afraid," said Jenna. "Those federation boys don't give up easily, do they? Our last manoeuvre didn't fool him at all, and he's heading straight for us if he keeps to his present course. I'm a bit worried about the navigation unit too. It's responding rather sluggishly at the moment and could need some maintenance."

She pointed to one of the dials on the control panel, and Blake nodded.

"I think we'll postpone our confrontation with the Colonel for the moment," he said. "Put the ship onto automatic and send her into deep space. Push her towards the light barrier – that'll give us time to give the ship a thorough check before we go back."

"It would be nice not to have to go back . . ." said Jenna, knowing full well what Blake's reply would be.

"Now, Jenna, we've been through all this before and —"

"I know, I know. Death to the Federation and all that! Still, it would be nice to have a rest . . ."

Blake's mouth tightened and Jenna knew that she had said enough. "I'm ready to accelerate," she said. "Will you alert the

others so that they can strap themselves in?"

Blake put out a call to the other members of the crew, and strapped himself into his seat. "Ready when you are," he said.

Jenna pressed the control and immediately the Liberator surged forward at a speed approaching the speed of light. The 'G' force increased with the speed and she was pressed back into her seat with such force that she could feel the blood draining from her face and knew that she would soon black out.

She released the control and relaxed. "There, that should keep us out of the way for a while," she said.

Soon the decks of the Liberator were a hive of activity as the various members of the crew checked over the equipment. Blake was in the teleport section when Avon sent for him. Under Jenna's advice Avon had been checking the navigation unit, and he had bad news.

"It's the multi-directional crystal," he told Blake. "There's a hairline fracture right through the middle, and the whole thing could shatter if we're not careful."

"Surely there must be a replacement crystal somewhere?" said Blake with a frown.

"If there is I haven't found it," said Avon. "Jenna's looking now, but I'm not optimistic. Normally these crystals last for ever – this one must have been flawed right from the start."

Avon was right. Jenna could not find a replacement crystal. Blake decided to ask the seventh member of the crew, the computer, Zen.

"Tell me, Zen," he said, "where can we find a mauxite crystal to replace the flawed one in the navigation unit? Somewhere close, as we don't want the present crystal to shatter on the way there."

Zen's indicator lights buzzed and flickered busily, then he spoke: THE NEAREST PLANET CONTAINING MAUXITE CRYSTAL IS GAMMA NINE. THE ATMOSPHERE IS BREATHABLE OXYGEN AND NITROGEN. VEGETATION SIMILAR TO THAT OF YOUR PLANET EARTH . . .

"Thank you, Zen," interrupted Blake. "We'll come back to you on that. Please give us the co-ordinates for Gamma Nine. Jenna, I want you to put the ship on manual and take her *gently*. If the crystal shatters we'll just drift helplessly in space."

Fortunately the crystal did not shatter, and Jenna brought the Liberator within transporting distance of Gamma Nine. "Okay, Zen," said Blake, "tell us what you know about Gamma Nine."

AS I WAS SAYING, GAMMA NINE IS VERY LIKE EARTH AND WILL PRESENT NO TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS. IT IS SPARCELY POPULATED, WITH ONE MINE CONTAINING MAUXITE CRYSTAL. THIS IS SITUATED NEAR THE MAIN ENCAMPMENT. THE INHABITANTS REGARD THE CRYSTAL AS SACRED AND ARE VERY HOSTILE TOWARDS INTRUDERS. IF YOU ARE CAUGHT THEY WILL PROBABLY KILL YOU.

Blake frowned. "This may be the nearest available source of mauxite, but it's going to be pretty difficult bringing any back to the ship by the sound of it."

Avon shrugged. "If you ask me," he said, "we would be better to cut our losses and head for the nearest habitable planet before the crystal splits."

"I hate to disappoint you, Avon," said Jenna, returning at that moment from the hold, "but the crystal has already shattered. That last journey was too much for it. So, alien or not, we are going to have to risk a visit to Gamma Nine or we won't be going anywhere."

Blake organised the landing party: Jenna, who knew what they were looking for; Gan, whose size was a deterrent even if he was unable to kill; Vila, the quick-fingered thief, and Blake himself. Avon was left in charge of the ship, with Cally, who was very annoyed at being left out of the action.

Zen provided the co-ordinates of the crystal mine while Blake and the others clipped on their special transporter bracelets. "All set?" said Avon, at the controls. "Right, away you go . . . and the best of luck."

The four found themselves at the entrance to the mine, which was a primitive-looking affair, and Blake motioned them to hide behind a boulder while they took stock of the situation.

As far as they could see there were no guards at the entrance, and all seemed to be quiet elsewhere. Cautiously they entered the mine. It was very dark inside and instinctively they felt for their weapons. But there was no one there.

Soon the passage split, so Blake sent Gan and Vila one way, while he and Jenna took the other. It was cold and damp, and Jenna moved closer to Blake as the thin beams from their torches threw weird shadows onto the uneven walls.

Suddenly they came to a sharp bend, and the floor of the passage began to slope downwards. It was lighter here, and Blake whispered, "Take it slowly now, there could be someone down there."

Jenna couldn't contain a shudder at the thought, and she had to clamp her teeth together to stop them chattering. They crept round the bend, their nerves taut, a sweat breaking out in spite of the cold.

Without warning their feet suddenly slipped from under them and they found themselves sliding helplessly towards the light. Blake tried to catch the rock as he passed, but that too was slippery with grease.

Finally they tumbled into a heap at the bottom of the slope, bruised and cut, their clothes covered with grease.

Immediately Blake was on his feet,

weapon in hand . . . but he was too late. He was staring into the black eyes of six stocky brown figures, each holding a lethal-looking spear.

As Blake raised his weapon, the figure nearest him moved forward with lightning speed and knocked it from his hand with a sharp blow. By now Jenna was also on her feet, and the brown men motioned her to drop her weapon. She and Blake were pushed along the passage, the spears pricking their backs if they slowed down.

"I hope the other two had better luck," whispered Jenna.

But even as she spoke there was a commotion ahead. They recognised Vila's voice and their hearts sank.

The two groups met at the junction of the passages, and the prisoners were pushed together as they began to climb a flight of rough stone steps.

"What happened?" hissed Blake.

"We fell down a large hole," whispered Vila, ruefully displaying his bruises, "and by the time we had picked ourselves up these brown bandits were on top of us. Gan did his best, but there were too many of them. Have you found any of the crystal yet?"

Blake shook his head. "I think that entrance to the mine was part of a booby trap, and we walked right into it," he whispered. "The real mine is probably elsewhere."

As soon as they reached the surface, Blake pressed the tiny microphone button on his bracelet. Now that they were away from the mine he could contact the Liberator. "Hello, Avon, I'm afraid we've run into trouble down here. Can you —"

He got no further. A sharp crack on the wrist from the nearest spear made him drop his hand, and within seconds all the transporter bracelets had been removed.

Blake thought grimly that although these

people might not say much they certainly had a way of getting what they wanted.

As they walked along he weighed up their chances of escaping. They were outnumbered by three to one; their weapons had been taken away; there was no way they could return to the ship without the bracelets, and they hadn't yet found any crystal. It all looked pretty hopeless.

Meanwhile, back in the Liberator, Avon and Cally were having a heated discussion about Blake's last transmission. Cally wanted to transport down immediately to find out what the trouble was, while Avon thought she was mad.

"What chance have you got on your own, if the *four* of them can't look after themselves?"

"It's better than sitting here doing nothing!" retorted Cally. *"You* can't go because you have to pilot the ship, but I could certainly be more useful down on Gamma Nine. Somebody's got to find that crystal."

Avon finally gave in. After all, if she wanted to kill herself, who was *he* to stop her? And as she said, she *might* get the precious mauxite.

Cally was transported down to the spot where Blake had last transmitted. There was no one in sight, but her experience as a resistance fighter stood her in good stead and she soon found the trail.

As she followed it, she took out her gun. If anyone attacked her she would certainly give as good as she got.

After some time she came to what looked at first like a hill, but was in fact a primitive earthwork fortress. She could see squat brown figures patrolling the outer limit in pairs, and beyond them was a deep ditch which surrounded the inner fort. The only way across the ditch seemed to be a wooden bridge, also closely guarded.

Keeping low to the ground, under cover of the long grass, Cally circled the fortress. Her only chance of getting through unobserved was a narrow channel that ran at right angles to the main ditch. It had probably been used for drainage, but now it was overgrown and choked with weeds.

Cally waited until the guards had passed and then she made a run for the channel. She flung herself into it and seconds later heard the heavy tread of the guards returning. She lay quite still, her breathing shallow, her face turned to the earth so that its whiteness wouldn't give her away.

But the guards were not expecting intruders, and they simply stepped over the channel and continued on their patrol.

Cally began to crawl along the channel, inching her way down into the main ditch, then up the other side. At times her feet slid back three paces for every two she went forward . . . but at last she reached the top.

As she regained her breath she had a good look round. Below her was the encampment, its rough stone buildings grouped round the outer walls. Thin wisps of smoke rose from small fires outside each one, but the cooking pots that hung over them were unattended. The entire population had gathered in the central clearing, round what looked like a large stone table.

Cally looked round quickly. No one

seemed to be interested in this part of the wall, so she dropped silently down into the enclosure and hid behind a wooden water tub. Moving cautiously from building to building she crept as near to the crowd as she dared. Now she could see what all the excitement was about.

Beside the stone table were four stout wooden posts, and tied to them were Blake, Jenna, Gan and Vila. As Cally watched, piles of wood were brought and stacked round the base of each pole.

Blake shifted uncomfortably as the coarse rope chaffed his wrists. Beside him, Gan was using all his strength to try and burst his bonds, but the harder he pulled the tighter the rope became. On the other side, Vila and Jenna had turned to watch a strange procession.

It was led by an imposing figure, much taller than the rest of the people. His hair was looped up onto his head in many tiny plaits, and his long robe was hung with droplets of crystal. Behind him came three small girls,

each carrying a carved box, and behind them a boy with a larger box.

The tall figure stopped in front of the stone altar, for that was obviously what it was, and bowed low. The children followed suit, as did all the people in the crowd. Then he took the box from the first girl and took out a large crystal. As he held it up to the light, the crystal glowed with colour and the crowd bowed low once more.

This ritual was performed with the next two boxes, and Blake looked longingly at the three crystals on the altar. If only he could reach them!

Now it was the turn of the boy. His box was placed on the stone and the tall figure took out the four transporter bracelets of the Liberator crew. He held one up in the air, and there was a murmur from the crowd which swelled as he pointed to Blake. As he held up each bracelet in turn the murmur rose to a chant, accompanied by the rhythmic stamping of feet.

Blake and the others watched in horror as four men appeared, each holding a flaming brand. They were going to be burned alive!

Suddenly, through the chanting, came Cally's telepathic voice: "Don't look round, but I am right behind you. As soon as I cut your ropes, make a dash for your bracelets."

Already the wood round each pole was beginning to burn, but Cally was quick, and within seconds all the ropes had been cut. As the four rushed to the altar she called urgently into her wrist microphone: "Now, Avon! Bring us up now!"

Jenna was almost overcome as the crowd surged forward, but Gan managed to keep the angry people at bay while she clipped on her bracelet. She was just in time. Before the astonished eyes of the crowd the five members of the Liberator crew dissolved into thin air, leaving four empty posts burning to ashes.

Back on the Liberator, once the general relief had subsided, Avon looked cynically at Blake. "Well," he said, "all that effort wasted. We've no chance of getting a crystal now."

"At least we tried," said Blake curtly.

"Did somebody mention crystals?" asked Vila, a look of studied innocence on his face. "Would this be any good?" He produced a mauxite crystal from his pocket. "I pinched it from the altar," he grinned. "One of the advantages of my thieving background."

Vila was the hero of the hour. Soon the crystal was in place and once again the Liberator was fully operational. Blake ordered a course taking the ship back the way it had come – back to the never-ending fight for freedom and justice throughout the galaxy.

Mind-reader Zen

On some of the long flights through space in the Liberator, Avon often amuses himself by trying to discover Zen's limitations. He tries unorthodox moves when playing chess and sometimes feeds in conflicting information for evaluation and analysis.

As yet he has not discovered any significant shortcomings in Zen's deductive abilities, but even he was shocked when, during one of these exchanges, the talking computer revealed what seemed to be an ability to read minds.

Avon asked Zen if the computer could discover two numbers he had memorised in his brain. Zen's lights flickered into action.

''AFFIRMATIVE, SUBJECT TO TWO CONDITIONS.''

The conditions were that the numbers be between 9 and 99, and that Avon would answer some simple arithmetical problems containing these numbers. Avon agreed, and Zen asked him to double the first number, add five, multiply by one hundred, divide by two, deduct the number of days in an earth year and then add the second number.

Avon was intrigued, did the sums, and came up with 1628 as his answer. Zen immediately told him that the numbers he had thought of were 17 and 43. He was right.

How did Zen do it? Avon was puzzled for some time, but in fact it is quite easy. Try it with any two numbers, say 19 and 64, and then learn Zen's secret.

Double the first number (19)	**38**
Add 5	**43**
Multiply by 100	**4300**
Divide by two	**2150**
Deduct the number of days in an earth year (365)	**1785**
Add the second number (64)	**1849**

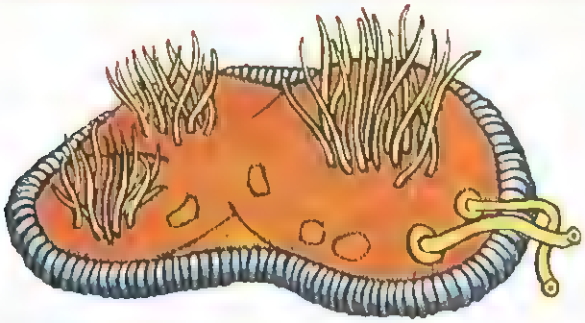
That's the answer you receive. How do you get the two numbers from that? Simply add 115 to the total (1849+115=1964). The first two figures on the left will give you the number first thought of and the two figures on the right will give you the second. This will work with any two numbers between 9 and 99.

Alien Encounters

Blake and his crew have travelled long and far since they first took control of the Liberator. During that time they have met many strange and fascinating forms of life. Here are some of the more bizarre lifeforms they have encountered.

THE TOAD MEN OF ABIGAS

Essentially traders, the Toad Men of Abigas are hampered in their relations with Federation planets because of their hideous appearance. They have large, bulbous eyes and wide mouths containing three rows of small, extremely sharp teeth. They are excellent mimics and can pick up new languages in hours. Perhaps the most disconcerting thing about their appearance is the tongue. This long, retractable and extremely versatile organ is covered with small, wet, wart-like protuberances. Toad Men use their tongues continuously, cleaning themselves, catching flies, and picking things up from the floor.

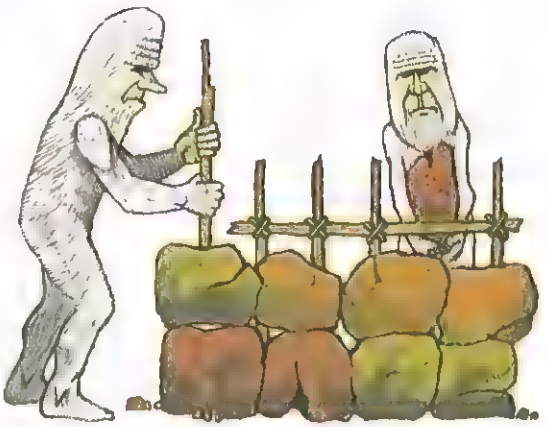


THE DRONGS

The Drongs are found only on the planet Drong, largest of all planets in the Vymian Galaxy. Such is the gravity on this huge planet that the boneless Drongs spend their lives flattened against the surface. They survive by absorbing nutrients from the thick Drong atmosphere.

THE INGRALS

The Ingrals are found throughout the Estipulan Solar System. They are secretive by nature and possess sub-human intelligence. Their bodies are humanoid in shape, but covered by a thin white fur. They have no chins and their necks grow straight up to their long pointed noses. Although they are compulsive builders, creating small clusters of dwelling units whenever they stop, the Ingrals are by nature nomadic. Ingral culture has remained at a standstill for hundreds of thousands of years.

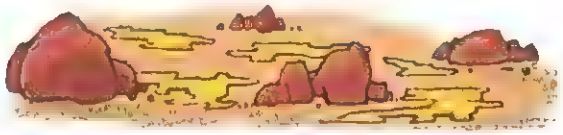


THE SKRULLS

These emaciated creatures are among the finest warriors in the galaxies. What they lack in size, they more than make up for in ferocity. Their tough, transparent skin clings close to their bones and tendons, making them at first look like the living skeletons of earth cats. They are the size of mice, and although their brains are correspondingly tiny, Skrulls are intelligent by earth standards. Every aspect of their brains is utilised, and although their capacity for abstract thought is small, they are extremely positive in their actions.

THE LINDS OF IKTHYOS

The Linds are perhaps the most amazing of all creatures encountered by the crew of the Liberator. When Blake and his crew went down onto Ikthyos they thought the planet was deserted until they found themselves in telepathic communication with the hundreds of small glutinous puddles that cover the landscape of Ikthyos. These were the peace-loving Linds. They told Blake how they had been solid in form until the inhabitants of the neighbouring planet Lannz began to farm them for their protein content and delicious taste. By sheer willpower they had changed themselves into their present form, difficult to harvest and extremely poisonous.



THE TARRANS

The Liberator's first meeting with the Tarrans was almost disastrous. These giant flying spiders swarm aound any moving object and are able to exist in the vacuum of space without artificial atmospheres. The Liberator was orbiting Auschkar when seven Tarrans landed on the ship. Within hours a colony of Tarrans had swarmed over the Liberator, blocking out light and threatening to send the Liberator into a potentially fatal diminishing orbit. They were eventually dislodged by massive electrical shocks. The origin and nature of Tarrans is unknown.

THE AKKASPS

Reptilian in appearance and with no discernible limbs, the Akkasps nevertheless enjoy a surprisingly pleasure-orientated material existence. Found throughout the ninth solar system of the fourth galaxy, the Akkasps use powered flight, enforce rigid laws, and employ what appeared to Blake and his crew to be servants in the shape of strange faceless monkeys that are in constant attendance. The Akkasps move in a manner similar to earthworms, and although Blake was unable to communicate with them it is thought that they possess considerable telepathic powers.

Revenge of the Mutoes

Federation Administration Commander Kratol Eng heard the first murder, saw the second, and was very nearly the victim of the third. It was a dull, rainy, ordinary day on Beshil, and as he studied the latest export figures there was a sudden commotion in the courtyard below the high-domed plexi-glass building that housed his workroom. Beshil was a trade centre of great importance, and was considered one of the safest of all Federation planets. The hand-picked population were all 'dociles', loyal to the Federation cause, and as they were kept that way by certain chemicals in their food and water, there was no need for more than two guards on the administration sector. As long as Eng had been on Beshil there hadn't been the slightest sign of insurrection, so when he heard a shriek of raw agony above the scuffling and shouting, he rose from his numerical visualator and stepped across to the window.

The light was blue grey and it took Eng a couple of seconds to focus properly. He saw a circle of about twelve humanoid shapes below backing off from the bloodstained body of a guard. They were smaller than most Beshilites and their clothing was unlike anything he had seen before, consisting as it appeared to of rags and random pieces of animal skins. One of them was holding the guard's gun, and when the second guard ran

from the building firing at the group, he opened fire. The guard fell dead in the middle of the courtyard, and with yelps of delight the small crowd swarmed over his body, taking whatever they could remove. Eng watched in silent fascination as the group, led by the one who had fired the shot, ran into the doorway below his vantage point.

Eng looked around nervously. They were in his building. Who were they? What did they want? He put his hand to his mouth and rubbed his upper lip. What could he do? He could already hear shuffling sounds. He had always liked to work with his doors open. Should he activate them now? If he closed them would it attract whoever it was to him? Were they after him anyway? They could easily shoot their way in with the weapons they had taken from the guards. Should he try to find somebody who was armed? Should he try and hide? What if they found him cowering behind a computer bank? Would that make them more or less likely to kill him?

His mind raced from question to question as he stood rooted, immobile, paralysed, at the window.

"Kratol! Look out! They're coming!"

Eng caught his breath. It was Shani; his assistant. He could hear her running along the corridor, coming towards his workroom. The fool! She was probably leading them right to him.

Shani rushed into the room. Her face was flushed, her eyes glittered with excitement and fear. She stared at Eng for a split second, then threw open her arms and rushed towards him. She fell sobbing against his chest.

"Kratol! Oh, Kratol, I'm glad you're safe! They – they –"

Eng wasn't listening. He was gazing horrified over her shoulder at the creature in the doorway. It stood a little under five feet and was covered in irregular patches of mangy fur. It was draped with a series of filthy rags, and where Eng was able to see the skin, it was dull yellow and covered with purple swellings. Its two eyes were huge, with tiny pupils, and its mouth was twisted in a grotesque parody of a grin. In its hand was the guard's gun and it was pointing straight at Eng.

Eng threw Shani from him and dropped to the floor just as the creature fired. Shani shrieked as the white hot blast of death caught her square in the back and sent her crashing into the window, arms spreadeagled. She slumped slowly to the floor, her long nails making high pitched screeching sounds against the plexi-glass. Eng lay shivering on the floor with his hands cupped to his face. He whimpered as he heard the creature crossing the room towards him. He squirmed as he heard the footsteps stop, wriggling on the floor in anticipation of the sudden blast that would end his existence. Instead, a fetid smell filled his nostrils and a deeply veined yellow hand tapped him softly on the head. He slowly lowered his hands from his face and stared in abject terror at the creature's toothless, wet, leering mouth. Eng felt sick. The thing seemed to be laughing.

"Up you get," said the creature in a slovenly approximation of speech, "the Mutoes are here."

On the Liberator's flight deck, Blake's 7 were for once in agreement.

"It's a bit small-time, but you never know your luck, do you?" Avon was unusually

cheerful as he studied the detailed charts on the screen.

Cally was unimpressed by his new found conviviality. She walked over to the screen and turned to Blake.

"So that's settled then," she said. "While those four hit the space docks, you and I go and put the antidote in the water supply."

"That's about it. The administration buildings have very few guards, but we can expect some resistance at the docks themselves." Blake traced his finger along a dark shape on the map. "Zen, are you sure this is the main water supply?"

"THE INFORMATION WOULD SUGGEST SO."

Blake looked quizzically at the large canister of pink liquid he held in his hand.

"And you're sure this stuff will work? Are you sure there's enough here to counteract the Federation's drugs?"

"THE FORMULA IS CORRECT. THE MEASURE IS CORRECT."

Blake smiled as he watched the others fixing their transportation bracelets.

"Well then, let's get to it. Beshil, here we come!"

Cally and Blake beamed down into the administration block in the middle of Beshil's largest port, while the other four beamed straight down into the docks. Zen had been told to transport them all back immediately if any one of them gave a pre-arranged signal. When Blake and Cally heard the fighting start at the docks they were to drop the antidote in the water supply, steal whatever useful information they could from the adminis-

tration block, then move through the town to rendezvous with Jenna, Avon, Gan and Vila. Any one of the six had the power to send the recall signal to Zen.

Blake felt the familiar giddiness as the displaced particles of his body reformed in their usual shape in a shadowy corner of the administration block's main courtyard. In a couple of seconds Cally materialised at his side.

Blake motioned for her to be quiet and Cally gave him a scornful glance. Blake smiled. There wasn't much you could teach Cally about fighting the Federation.

A sound close by made them step back closer to the smooth transparent walls of the building. Someone was running into the courtyard. Blake and Cally pressed themselves close against the walls. There was more than one. Blake began to get worried . . . there were hundreds of them!

A Federation guard rushed into the courtyard, followed by others. Blake and Cally ducked through a doorway as more and more guards ran into the courtyard and took whatever cover they could find, carefully training their weapons on the very doorway Blake and Cally had passed through. Blake and Cally exchanged puzzled glances, then Blake felt the muzzle of a gun being placed gently against the side of his head. He could smell something strong and unpleasant, and was about to turn when a slurred voice cut him short.

"No heroics. Just turn around and walk to the lift."

Inside the lift, Blake was able to see his captor for the first time. Whatever it was, it needed medical attention. It was small and smelly, with large eyes with tiny pupils and the yellowed skin peeping out from the ragged clothes was covered in sores.

"What's going on?" asked Blake. "There are Federation guards all over the place out there."

The creature grinned and a long trickle of saliva fell from his lower lip.

"That's because of us. We Mutoes are taking over the planet!"

Blake stared into the red-veined eyes of the Mutoe until the lift stopped. He wondered whether to send the recall signal immediately. The lift doors slid open and the creature ushered them along the corridor with a series of sharp prods with the muzzle of his gun.

They came to a room and walked inside. There were more Mutoes in the room and a very frightened man, who was sitting in a chair, turning his head away from one of the Mutoes, who was leaning close and whispering something to him, then giggling loudly.

"Now look," said Blake firmly, "if you're against the Federation, then we're with you. We've come here on a sabotage mission ourselves."

The Mutoes did not answer. They formed a small circle round Blake and Jenna and looked them up and down suspiciously. One of the Mutoes pulled a rag away from his sleeve and held a diseased arm up to Blake's face.

"One of us, are you? You don't look like one of us. You don't look like someone who has spent his life in the slime of the underground swamps. You look more like a fat overfed normal to me."

Blake forced himself to look at the arm.

"We're not Mutoes, if that's what you mean. But we *are* against the Federation. If you're planning something, we'll be glad to help."

A strangled cry escaped the Mutoe's lips.

"Planning? Yes, we've been planning. We've been planning ever since we learnt that there were other worlds than the stinking swamp we call home. We've been planning since we learned how the normals drove our ancestors into that bug-ridden underground mess. We've been planning, all right, and do you know what we've been planning? Revenge – that's what we've been planning – revenge against people like you!"

"But it was the Federation that your ancestors were hiding from."

"You're all normals to us. That's why we got the bomb!"

The other Mutoes began giggling at the mention of the bomb. The leading Mutoe produced a seed-shaped canister that appeared to be filled with dust.

"Hundreds of billions of tiny spores, and each one capable of doing this to you!" He pulled the rag aside from his scrawny chest. Blake could not help but wince. "Eats the flesh right off you, doesn't it? Now, let's have your weapons."

The odds were too great for Blake to resist. He began to struggle when the Mutoes started removing his transportation bracelet, and both he and Cally were struck to the ground.

"Pretty, aren't they?" laughed the lead Mutoe as he placed the bracelets on his wrists. "Now that we've got a nice big crowd outside, I think I'll drop the bomb." He raised his gun and blasted a large hole in the plexiglass wall. The melting glass trickled for a few inches and then hardened again. The lead Mutoe went over to the window.

"Wait!" shouted Blake. "You'll be killing thousands of people. You'll probably be killing yourselves!"

The Mutoe stopped and turned to face Blake, his head bobbing in a slow, rhythmic nod as his face split wider and wider into a toothless grin.

"That's right. Maybe life is precious to you, normal, but when you get like we are – well,

death's the best friend you can have. Right?"

The other Mutoes laughed and cheered as the lead Mutoe went over to the hole and lifted his arm to throw the canister into the courtyard below. Blake launched himself forward in a frantic effort to stop him but, as he dived, the lead Mutoe began to dissolve and Blake passed right through him and crashed into the wall. When he looked up, the Mutoe had disappeared.

The other Mutoes hesitated.

"Where did he go?"

"He must have fallen through the hole."

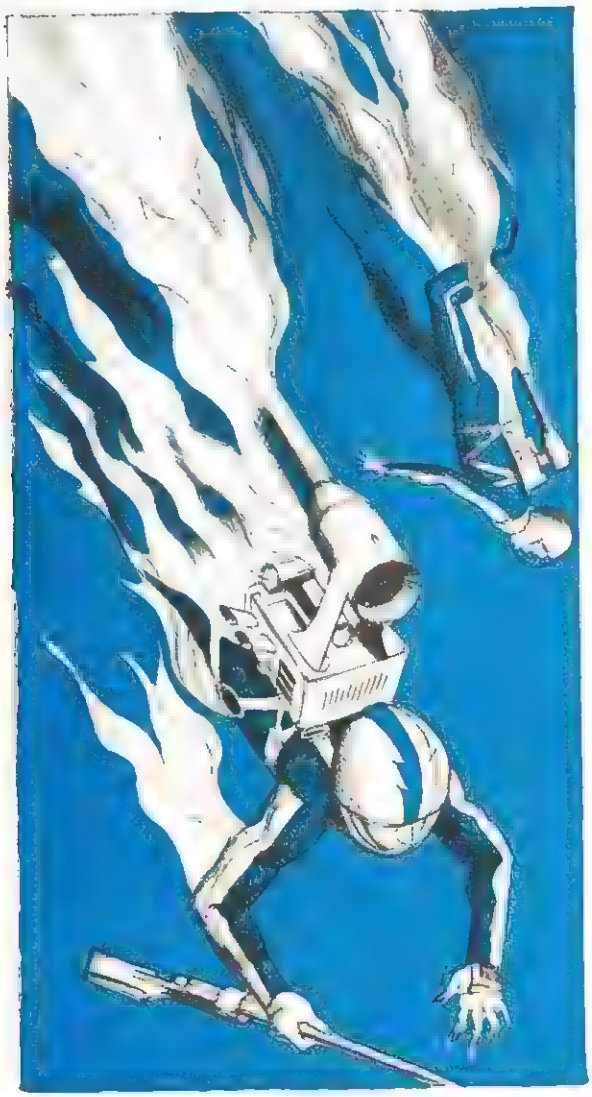
"No, he just disappeared!"

"He just vanished!"

"Maybe the troops –"

Two small, round, flat objects sailed through the gap in the plexi-glass wall and clattered across the floor.

Blake and Cally immediately recognised them as debilitation grenades the Federation used to incapacitate enemies for short spells of time. He closed his eyes and covered his ears and dived behind a computer bank. Cally did the same. The Mutoes were about to open fire when the grenades went off.



There were two short, extremely loud bangs and a number of blinding flashes. Even with their eyes and ears covered, Blake and Cally were still dazed as they got to their feet. The Mutoes were wandering around with their eyes staring sightlessly at the ground.

Through the humming in his ears Blake heard the sound of the lift being operated. He grabbed a weapon from one of the Mutoes and tossed it to Cally. He snatched another one for himself and, as the lift doors opened up, so did he.

There were seven Federation troops in the lift and they fell in a heap under Blake's deadly accurate firepower. Blake shot at the roof of the lift and the cable snapped, sending the lift hurtling down to the bottom. Behind him, Cally was firing through the hole in the plexi-glass walls at the Federation troops flying round the building with jet packs on their backs. Two of them plummeted to earth in flames, and a third crashed into the side of the building and his jet pack exploded. Blake went over to the lift shaft and began to rain fire down into the black hole.

The Mutoes were beginning to recover their senses. They joined Blake and Cally in the desperate fight against the Federation troops.

The Mutoe next to Cally fell to the floor covered in molten glass as a well-aimed shot from a rooftop sniper struck home. Cally and the others ducked behind the central control panel and fired at anything that moved outside the building.

As Blake blasted away down the shaft, he heard a shout, felt a searing pain across his back and saw the wall beside him disintegrate. He cursed. The Federation troops had somehow got into the corridor. With a weapon in each hand he fired continuously in their direction as he and the two surviving Mutoes with him dashed back across the corridor into Eng's workroom.

Eng, seeing the battle was almost won, dashed into the corridor to join the Federation troops. They cut him down in a hail of white hot energy bolts. With his eyes

wide from shock he crumpled to his knees, his arms held forward in mute supplication. Another blast caught him full on the chest and sent him spinning to the floor like a rag doll.

"I'll cover the door, you keep to the windows!"

If Cally heard Blake's command she did not show it. She was taking aim at a guard hovering outside the window who was drawing a small black ball from a pouch in his

belt. When Cally's shot hit him he exploded in a ball of flame.

The Mutoe beside Blake tugged his arm and raised his pistol to two shapes that were shimmering into being in the centre of the workroom. Blake restrained the Mutoe from firing.

Gan and the lead Mutoe materialised. Gan threw a bracelet to Blake and the Mutoe ripped his bracelet from his wrist and tossed it to Cally. As they put them on their wrists they heard footsteps running down the corridor towards the open door.

"Get to it!" shouted the lead Mutoe, raising his spore bomb in his hands. "We Mutoes got work to do!"

As the Federation troops burst in and the Mutoes opened fire, Gan, Cally and Blake activated their bracelets. As their atoms dispersed and they disappeared from the room they saw the lead Mutoe hurl his bomb to the floor, where it cracked open and a cloud of dust rose to cover his ravaged body.

Back on the Liberator flight deck, Avon and Vila were fuming.

"It was hardly guarded!" Vila compained.

"We could have walked right in there and taken what we wanted," agreed Avon. "If these two soft-hearted heroes hadn't seen the troops going to the administration block and decided to change plans, we could have robbed that place blind."

Jenna nodded sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, Avon, but when I shadowed the troops and saw them surrounding that building I thought it was a trap. If the Federation had got hold of Blake's and Cally's bracelets before I sent the recall signal, we could have materialised with a couple of neuro-bombs for partners."

"And instead we got that . . . that thing!" said Vila with obvious distaste. "What was it? This whole mission's been a failure. We've got nothing and you didn't even get that stuff into the water supply."

"It may have been a failure for you, Vila," said Blake calmly, "but in the end that stuff in the water wasn't needed."

"And as for that thing, as you called it," added Cally, "well, he was just another warrior in the fight against the Federation."

Avon turned on his heel and walked away.

"Big deal . . ."

Dateline

Although the Federation have tried to erase and re-write history, the flourishing underground movement on earth tries to keep the truth alive. To them, history is a reminder that things were not always as they are, and the knowledge of past events gives them hope that in time the memory of the tyranny of the Federation will be just another part of history.

The time before the year 2000 A.D. is perhaps the most important of all eras to the revolutionaries. Although there was much disease and countless wars, earth was still struggling towards a better tomorrow. Man was free to learn from the mistakes of his past, and there was still hope that one day he would be able to live in peace with dignity and pride.

The few history books covering the time from 1800–2000 A.D. are kept carefully hidden, but the members of the underground have devised intricate systems for keeping the memory of the past alive. One of these formulae for illuminating the past is a method of naming what day of the week a certain date fell upon. Most members of the underground on earth would be able to tell you what day of the week any date between 1800 and 2000 A.D. fell on, because they have carefully learnt three tables. The tables are these:

DAYS

Sunday	1
Monday	2
Tuesday	3
Wednesday	4
Thursday	5
Friday	6
Saturday	0

MONTHS

January, October	1
May	2
August	3
February, March, November	4
June	5
September, December	6
April, July	0

YEARS

1800-1900	2
1900-2000	0

Using these tables, the underground are able to pinpoint days and dates with remarkable accuracy. The only adjustments to these tables occur in a leap year, when the months' numbers are January – 0 and February – 3. Otherwise the numbers remain the same throughout.

How do they do it? It is simple for them. Say, for instance, they wanted to find out what day of the week it was on January 4th, 1949.

First of all they would write down the last two figures of the year (49).

They would divide this by 4, ignoring anything over (12).

Next they would add the month number – Jan = 1 – (13).

Then they would add the date, 4th (17).

Then they would add the year number – 0 – (17).

They would add 49 to 17 and divide by 7 (66 ÷ 7 = 9 with 3 over).

It is the number that remains that is important here. In this case it is 3. Check it against the day chart and you have Tuesday. The 4th January, 1949 was a Tuesday. Try it yourself. It works with any date between 1800 and 2000 A.D. With a little practice you will be able to do this as well as any member of the underground movement.

The Body Stealers

"Is the bracelet on?"

Blake peered over the edge of the tower at the dark shapes swarming through the stormy Vemos night below. Cally clipped the bracelet shut on the thin wrist of the semi-conscious figure propped up in front of her against the tower wall. A flash of lightning lit up Rask's cruel features. Thin lips, hollow cheeks, a long sharp nose and two glazed oval eyes, staring with hatred at Cally from under a mass of lank hair whipped forward by the wind.

"It's on."

They could hear the Federation soldiers beating at the trapdoor beneath their feet. Blake raised his transmitter to his mouth.

"O.K. – beam us up!"

As the three shapes began to dematerialise a loud thunderclap sounded and a second bolt of lightning flashed down from the sky and slammed into the tower. The shapes flickered, then were gone.

Jenna struggled with the controls of the transporter.

"Something's wrong – I think I've lost them."

"ADJUST MOLECULATOR DIAL SIX PER CENT."

Jenna obeyed Zen's emotionless voice.

Three shimmering shapes began to form on the platform. Jenna stared at the dials with mounting frustration.

"They're not coming through."

"ADJUST MOLECULATOR ONE FIFTH PER CENT. BOOST TRANSIFIER TWO POINT ONE PER CENT."

Jenna obeyed again. The three shapes continued to shimmer, seemingly on the verge of materialising.

"REDUCE TRANSIFIER BOOST."

Jenna's nimble hands worked quickly as she re-set the dial. Trust things to go wrong when she was perfecting her manual control techniques! The shapes flickered and she watched with relief as their features gradually began to harden, their outlines becoming more and more clear. At last, Blake, Cally and Rask were standing before her. She was about to add a welcome to her already wide smile when all three of them slumped to the floor.

"Gan! Vila! Come here, quick!"

Gan and Vila rushed into the room. Jenna was bending over the still figure of Blake with her ear pressed close to his chest.

"Something's wrong – we've got to do something!"

"Is he dead?"

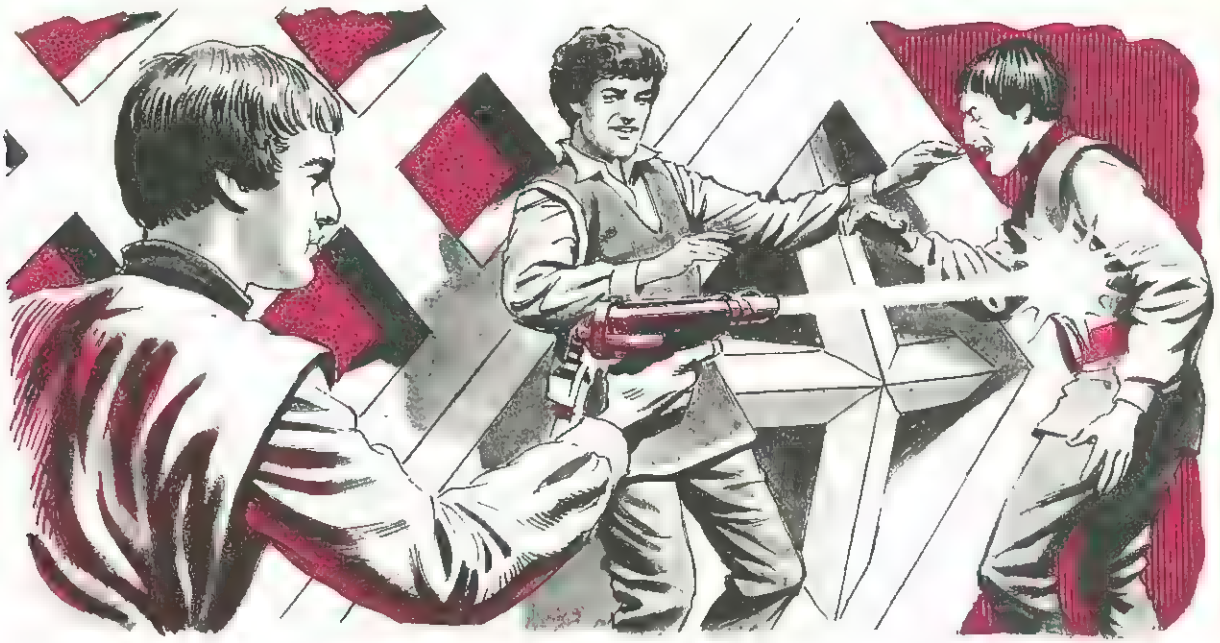
Jenna shook her head as she got to her feet.

"No, they're all alive – just. We'd better put them in the rest area."

Gan draped Blake and Cally over his massive shoulders and walked to the rest area. Behind him, Jenna dragged the thin figure of Rask. Avon entered as Gan was laying the two bodies carefully down. He ignored his comrades and went straight over to the dishevelled figure Jenna was dragging onto a bunk. He helped her lie him down then brushed back the hair from the white face and lifted one of the senseless man's eyelids. A malevolent orb gazed sightlessly into his own. Avon let the eyelid fall.

"So this is Rask, eh? He doesn't really look a Federation hero."

Jenna looked down. For once she was in agreement. The name of Duncan Rask had always inspired a kind of awe in her. It was synonymous with everything brilliant,



original and daring in the Federation's military history. Rask was an intellectual warrior, a strategist and military planner without rival. She had always thought such a man would be more . . . well, imposing. She walked over to Cally and Blake and checked their pulses.

"They seem to be doing all right now. The best thing we can do is let them get some rest."

They trooped out and made their way back to the flight deck. They had only just arrived when Zen's lights began flashing.

"EMERGENCY. DISTURBANCE IN REST AREA."

They turned on their heels and ran back the way they had come. Avon arrived first and saw the two figures of Blake and Rask struggling violently in the middle of the room. He drew his weapon as Jenna came panting to his side.

"Put it on stun, we want him alive."

Avon adjusted his weapon and took aim. It was a difficult shot, as the two men were locked in a fierce and fast-moving battle. Rask appeared to be driven by some inner strength, for he fought with a fury that belied his size. After breaking Blake's stranglehold on his neck he stepped momentarily back and Avon opened fire. The blast caught Rask below his right shoulder and he crumpled to the floor. Blake put his hand to a long thin scratch across his cheek and dabbed it for blood.

"Are you all right?" Jenna went over to him.

Blake seemed daze. He stared at his hand for nearly a minute.

"Yes, yes, I'm all right," he said distractedly, "a little dazed, that's all." He walked over to where Cally lay, still unconscious on the bunk. "How is she?"

"She's going to be all right. Can you remember what happened?"

Blake gazed round the smooth walls of the rest area as his eyes reflected the inner struggle to make sense of the different memories, different sensations. When he spoke his voice was slow, halting.

"We . . . we were in the tower. We'd got Rask and we were just going to beam up. There was this terrible noise . . . very loud . . . and there was a flash. And then . . . then . . . then I was elsewhere for a while – where I can't tell you because I don't know. The next thing I knew I was opening my eyes and this fellow was strangling me. I jumped off the bunk and tried to fight him off but I was weak and he was like a mad man. He kept hitting me and trying to strangle me."

"He'll be out for a couple of hours at least," said Avon, patting his weapon. "You needn't worry about him."

Blake's eyes flashed as he leant over the still figure of Rask.

"The great Duncan Rask, eh?" He lifted up the limp form and placed it on a bunk. "With what he knows we'll be able to disrupt the

Federation's military operations so badly they'll be virtually defenceless."

Blake led them back to the flight deck. Avon watched carefully as Blake set the controls.

"Where are we going?"

"Bastine."

"Bastine? I thought we were taking Rask to Palor 2."

"Bastine – when we were springing him I saw these plans for a massive military build-up there."

"In that case, wouldn't it be better to stay away?"

Blake seemed surprised by Avon's attitude.

"We're going to Bastine and that's final." His voice was cold and hard. The room was suddenly full of tension.

Avon let it drop. "Bastine it is then."

The first thing Cally felt when she came to was confusion. Her senses were still swimming as she lifted herself up on one elbow. It took her some time to realise that she was in the rest area of the Liberator. She saw Rask lying still on a bunk across the room. Why had they left her unattended? Why hadn't Rask been tied down? She felt something was wrong.

Cally swung her feet onto the floor and rose unsteadily. She moved slowly over to where Rask was lying. Rask's eyes were moving under the closed lids. He was coming round. Cally felt an aura of confusion emanating from the unconscious man. Something was definitely wrong.

On the flight deck, Avon was becoming agitated.

"Just what do you plan to do when we get to Bastine?"

Blake looked up from the control panel where he had been feeding numerical information into Zen's circuits for some time.

"We're just going to attack any Federation installation we can find. With this ship and my organisation they haven't got a chance against us."

"I don't want to seem single-minded, but what's in it for us?"

Blake turned away and continued feeding instructions into Zen's circuits.

At last he stopped. With a strange glint in his eye he turned to Avon.

"You'll be allowed to live – providing you do as I say."

Avon laughed. "That incident with the transporter may have scrambled your brains, Blake. There's five of us here apart from you, and we prefer to discuss projects that might endanger our lives."

"That's right, Blake, you can't make us go to Bastine if we don't want to." Vila took his place at Avon's side.

Gan and Jenna looked on dubiously.

Blake smiled. "On the contrary – I can make you do anything I wish to, anything at all. Don't look so shocked, and put that gun back where it won't do any damage."

Vila kept his newly-drawn gun pointing straight at Blake's heart. His lips twitched nervously. Blake went on undeterred.

"You see, I know that with this ship and my military knowledge, I will be able to hold the Federation to ransome, perhaps even destroy it completely. As for your role in this enterprise – it has suddenly become obsolete. I have programmed this computer to respond only to my voice. I have also taken the precaution of programming it to self-destruct if it is fed any messages without the six digital prefix that is locked firmly in here." He pointed to his temple. "So you see, you must all do as I say or . . . boom." He said the word lightly, accompanying it with a gentle shrug of his shoulders.

Jenna was getting angry. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I'm as sane as I always was. This is the chance I've been looking for."

"But why?"

"Because he isn't Blake."

They all turned at the sound of Cally's voice. She stood at the entrance to the flight deck with her long fingers touching her temples. Her voice was soft.

"I don't know how or why it happened, but somehow Duncan Rask was transferred into Blake's body when we beamed up. And now he's got complete charge of the ship."

"Exactly, and I'm going to use this magnificent fighting weapon to get my revenge on those petty bureaucrats in the Federation."

Cally suddenly dropped to the floor and the figure of Rask rushed in. He shot at Blake's body, catching him under the heart. Blake fell on his back, with his arms outstretched and his knee slightly raised.

"Cally, can you do it?"

The others could scarcely believe it was Blake speaking. The voice, the body, and the head were all Rask's. It was only when he moved with characteristic determination across the deck and bent down over his own body that they realised, through the tiny, familiar, confident gestures he made that this

was in fact Blake, trapped inside the body of Duncan Rask.

Cally closed her eyes, straddled the body on the floor and began to concentrate. She was searching Rask's mind for the six digital prefix. Blake repeated his question.

Cally slowly shook her head. "It's there, all right, but I can't make out the numbers. There's some barrier he's erected round them."

"Should I get the phenozol?"

"Too risky. Phenozol would relax his brain to the point where the numbers might be forgotten. He might wake up without ever being able to remember them."

"Couldn't you probe his mind and find the numbers before they disappeared?"

Cally was unsure. If she failed, they would be in a worse mess than they were now. But then if she succeeded she might be able to get control of the Liberator again. She tossed back her hair and put her fingers to her temples.

"Get the phenozol."

Cally administered the phenozol herself, using an air-powered syringe. Almost immediately she felt Rask's mind relax. Cally concentrated on the dark, solid area of thought she felt sure contained the six numbers. Slowly the darkness fell away, like grease eaten up by a powerful detergent. Suddenly the numbers were revealed to her, but even as they appeared, they began falling, tumbling downwards away from her, leaving her range of perception.

"Two, two, six, two, nine . . . seven."

She slumped forward in relieved exhaustion. Avon felt a hand on his shoulder and turned. Although the voice that spoke to him was Rask's and the eyes that stared into his were also Rask's, Avon was left in no doubt that he was communicating with Blake.

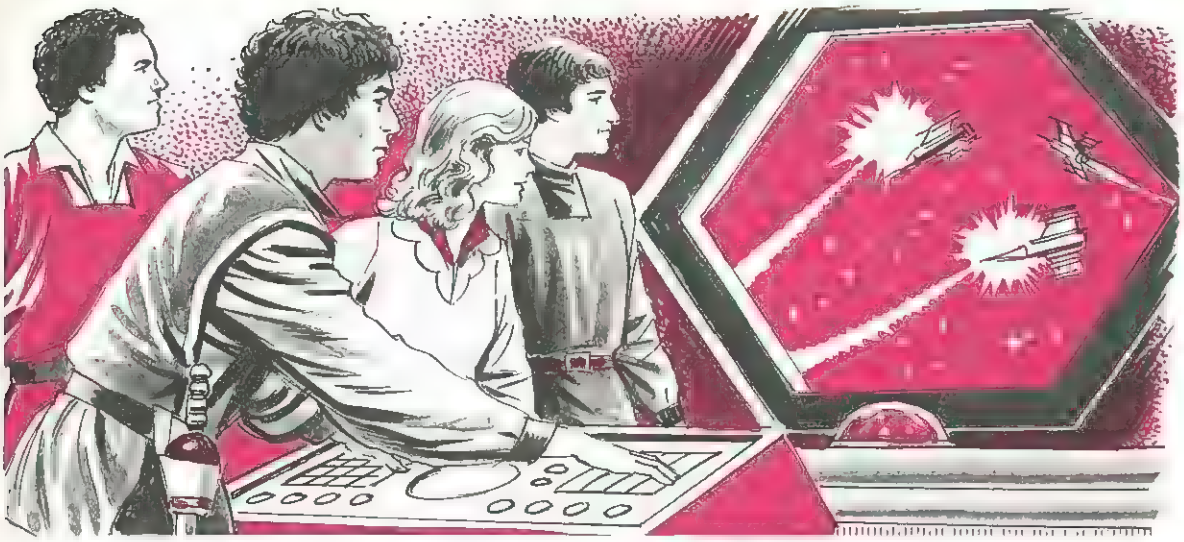
"Can you reprogramme Zen to ignore his instructions?" Rask's voice carried all Blake's usual urgency. Avon began to punch the six digital prefix into the computer.

"Providing he hasn't set us any more booby traps, I think we'll be all right."

Avon worked fast and well. He pressed the last of the buttons and stood back.

"I think I deserve a cup of tea for that."

"ONE SUGAR OR TWO?"



The others laughed as a steaming cup was produced by Zen.

"Now what are we going to do about your new body?"

"Can we get Zen to recreate the exact circumstances of the beaming up?"

Avon rubbed his brow.

"It's possible. Unlikely, but possible."

"Good, then let's get onto it."

"Wait." Blake's smile looked strangely hideous across Rask's features. "While I'm here I might as well make the most of it. Zen, take us back to Vemos."

Within the hour, they were back in orbit round Vemos. Blake, still in Rask's body, had beamed down as soon as they arrived. On board the Liberator, Rask was waiting at gunpoint to be transported back to the planet. Jenna had left the controls to Zen, but she was still nervous.

"Are you sure this will work?"

"SUCCESS A SIXTY-NINE PER CENT POSSIBILITY."

They waited impatiently for Blake's call to be beamed up.

"How long has he been gone?"

"He should be ready to beam up inside a minute."

Cally suddenly started as she studied the controls.

"He'd better be – three Federation ships are coming into scanner range."

"Zen, can we still work this if we take evasive action?"

"SUCCESS A THIRTY-ONE PER CENT POSSIBILITY."

They watched as the three dots on the tracking screen moved nearer to their position. Within a minute they would be in firing range. Rask's voice, controlled by Blake on Vemos, crackled over the speaker.

"Beam him down."

Zen's lights began flashing and Blake's body shimmered and disappeared. The others waited nervously.

"Federation ships preparing to fire."

Vila was turning white. The muscles in Avon's cheeks were working overtime. Suddenly the figure of Blake shimmered into existence on the transportation platform. For a brief second, they all stared at each other, wondering. Blake stepped swiftly off the platform.

"Zen, take immediate effective action. Operate rearguard offensive technique with torpedoes."

The Liberator swung majestically round in space. Two space torpedoes shot from the rear of the ship and exploded around the lead Federation ship. Two more badly damaged the second ship, and the third was soon a tiny speck on the screen. Blake twirled the spare bracelet round his finger. The others stood round him.

"Glad to be home?"

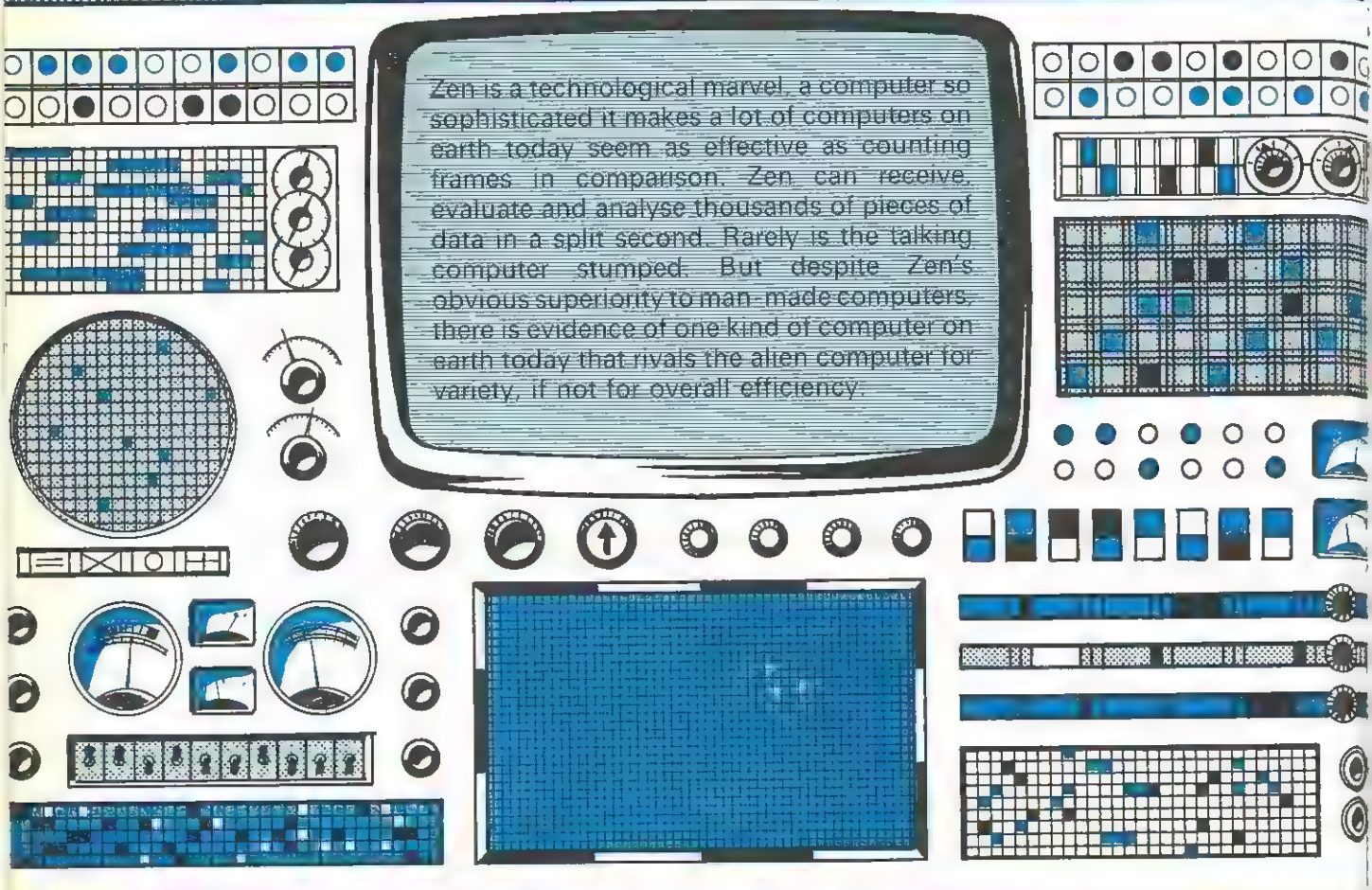
"Very glad. And now that I've got all Rask's plans on my recorder it will take the Federation months to reorganise their programme."

"A pretty satisfying day, then?"

Blake looked down at his hands and wiggled his fingers.

"A weird one, no doubt. But yes, all in all, a pretty satisfying day."

Super Computer



Zen is a technological marvel, a computer so sophisticated it makes a lot of computers on earth today seem as effective as counting frames in comparison. Zen can receive, evaluate and analyse thousands of pieces of data in a split second. Rarely is the talking computer stumped. But despite Zen's obvious superiority to man-made computers, there is evidence of one kind of computer on earth today that rivals the alien computer for variety, if not for overall efficiency.

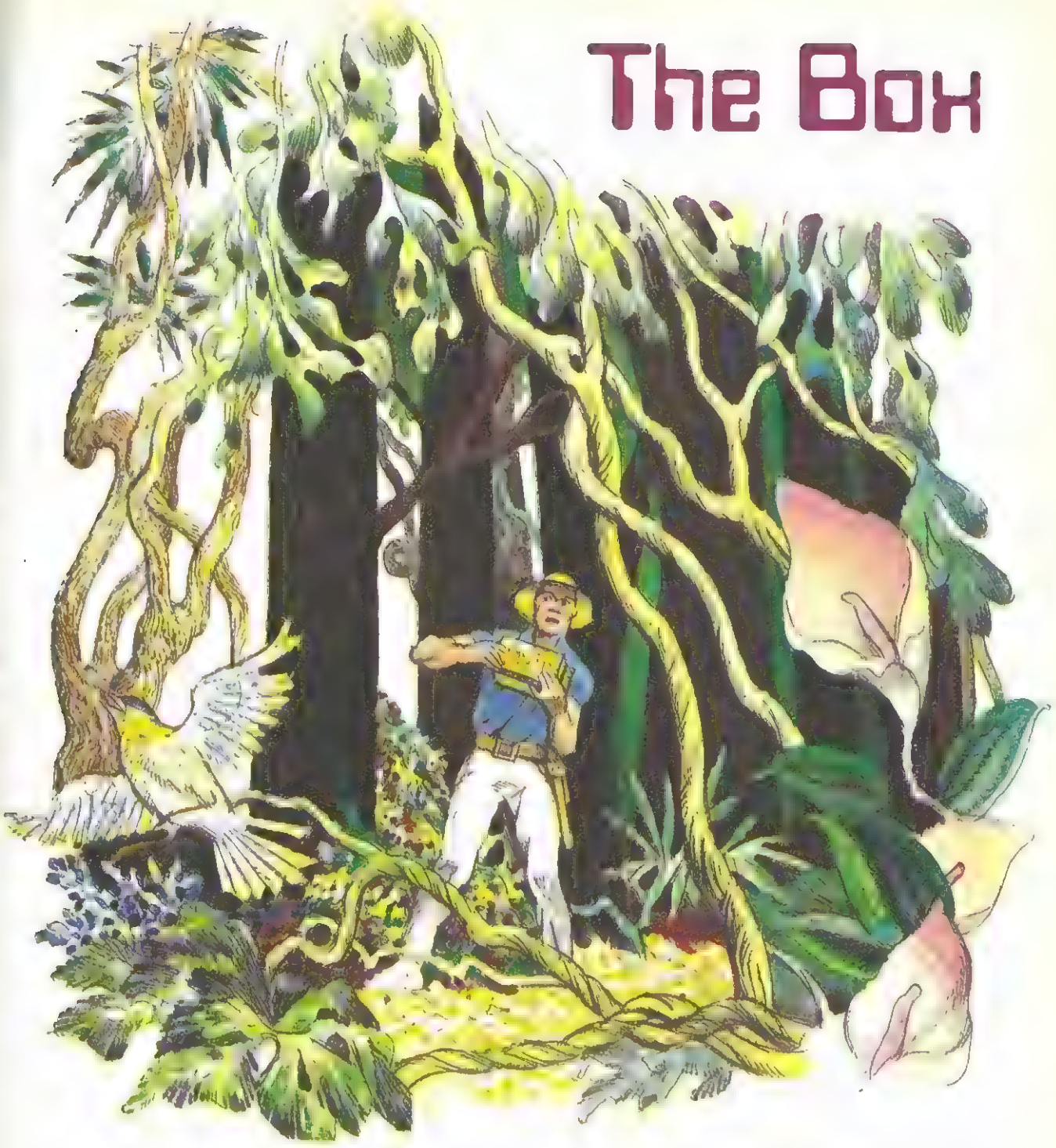
Earth's greatest computer is a miracle of miniaturisation. The whole thing weighs around three pounds when removed from its casing and is about the size of a smallish coconut. Inside this mini marvel are some ten million cells, many of which the computer is able to replace and repair without outside help. These cells have different functions, enabling the computer to comprehend data simultaneously from hundreds of sources. The thousands of millions of circuits it contains means that the computer can process vast amounts of data for instant or future use.

The computer requires little electrical energy to function. Between five and fifty millionths of a volt will set it working. It can be activated by aural or visual stimulae. It will respond to and evaluate touch, taste and smell. It can link up seemingly diverse pieces of information without programming. It can act apparently intuitively when furnished with insufficient data.

Unfortunately, the super computer has its drawbacks. Few are utilised to their full capacity. Malfunctions are often ignored. Its evaluation of information is not consistent. It is hampered in its efficiency by its unique ability to experience feelings. Its average lifespan is around seventy years.

There are millions of these computers working on earth today and there have been for thousands and thousands of years. You have one working for you at this moment, translating the images of ink on paper into information. Yes, you've probably already guessed it . . . the super computer is the human brain.

The Box



Kord was afraid. Just how close were they?

He stopped by a tree in the steaming jungle and listened for sounds of pursuit. He clutched the box to his chest with his left hand, and with his right he nervously fingered a fresh rash of spots on his cheek, tracing the small red lumps with his fingers like a man reading braille. His hands were wet and shaking. His eyes felt hot and dry. He seemed to see everything through a thin film of blood. His head ached, his brain was burning, and the ringing in his ears was so loud he could not tell if the rustling, crashing, whooping sounds he heard were the jungle animals, the Federation security patrol, or his imagination.

He slumped back against a tree and looked down at the box in his hand. His sudden shiver was only partly due to fever.

Why had he done it? He – Lance Kord, harmless archaeologist, why had he ever tried to steal a rocket in the first place? The idea was suddenly so preposterous that he laughed out loud, a harsh, sobbing laugh from his hot dry throat. The beauty of it was that he had nearly succeeded. If that guard hadn't spotted the difference in the fuel level he'd have got away. He felt the box grow warm in his hand and he stopped laughing. He knew very well why he had tried such a ludicrous stunt. The thing in the box had told him to.

The thing in the box. Would he ever be rid of it? Kord wanted to hurl the box away from him into the jungle, but he couldn't. He could no more get rid of it now than he could get rid of his own hand. He wanted to cry but he stopped himself. The thing didn't like emotions. They got in the way of its plans.

Kord drew his laser pistol from his belt and blundered forward through the foliage. He must keep running. He had to escape. The thing in the box told him so.

On board the Liberator, an argument was beginning to boil over.

"For pity's sake, Blake, any fool can see that it's a trap!" Kerr Avon was losing his usual cool.

"Even if it is a trap, it's still too good an opportunity to miss. If you're scared . . ."

"Don't try those infantile psychological tricks on me, Blake. What possible reason have I got for putting my life at risk? I'm alive and I'm free . . . and I mean to stay that way."

Blake looked at the five faces around him. He could count on Cally agreeing, certainly. Maybe even Jenna and Gan. But Avon and Vila were going to need convincing.

"All right. Maybe that message was planted. Maybe we were meant to intercept it. Maybe that stuff about Professor Noirama being captured is a lie – though Heaven help us if it isn't. The facts are that Axtra is the only planet in this area producing enough Axtranium to build the shields for Federation warships. If we can close down the mines, we can throw their whole military building programme off schedule."

Vila sat lazily down and crossed his legs. "But there is nothing in it for us? The risk is too great."

"The consequences of Professor Noirama falling into their hands are too great not to follow this up. Noirama's research into time manipulation would give the Federation incredible power. It was only because he himself saw the danger that he fled." Blake could see he was not getting through. "Besides which, the riches of the ancient Axtran civilisation have never been discovered."

Jenna became interested.

"Yes, I remember reading about it at school. The Axtrans had lived in complete isolation before the Federation took them over. They were very advanced in some ways, very primitive in others. They had never split the atom, and yet they practised levitation and telekinesis. But I thought the famous Axtran treasures were just a myth."

Blake pressed on. "Maybe that's what the Federation wanted you to think. They have never been at ease with the Axtrans. When they invaded, the Axtrans hid their treasures away. Nobody has ever found them. Even today the Federation find it difficult to control the Axtrans. They think of them as creepy, unnatural. The mineworkers talked about the place as if it's haunted, and there is

a disproportionate number of fatalities. If it wasn't for the Axtrans' knowledge of Axtranium conversion the Federation would have wiped out the whole planet. The Axtrans would help us, and you might be able to do some business with them concerning their treasures. What few artefacts fell into Federation hands are now almost priceless."

Blake knew Avon wouldn't stop at trading if they came across any treasure, but he wanted to go to Axtra. If Avon started trouble on the planet he would just have to deal with it then.

Avon was still unconvinced. "What exactly do you plan to do?"

"We beam down to Axtra and contact the Axtran rebels. If they know whether the Federation are holding Noirama we find out where he's being held. Then we spring him, and if there's any chance of blowing up any mines we do that too."

Avon laughed.

Blake stared him straight in the eye. "We're going to cause havoc down there, and if you've got wits enough to make something out of that havoc then come along. But if you feel that it's too much of a risk then stay on the Liberator and give us twenty-four hours." Blake glanced at Gan. He saw the giant Zephronian approved of what he was saying. "If you and Vila want to stay, Gan will stay with you."

"And me?" asked Jenna. "What about me?"

"I suggest that if you've something constructive to say then you say it. If not, don't bother. Whether you come or go is up to you, but one thing is certain, and that's that I'm going. Now who's with me?"

Cally stepped forward immediately.

"I am. If we just pass this by, then we'll never be any kind of threat to the Federation."

Gan watched her, then quietly stepped forward and took his place by her side. Vila and Jenna stayed still.

Avon sounded bitter. "A planet full of ghosts? A hidden treasure? A daring rescue with lots of big explosions in the mines? This is madness. Axtra is a secure Federation planet. We can't do anything there."

Cally turned on him. "The Federation is warping all forms of life, perhaps permanently. We have this ship and we don't take the suppressants that keep everybody quiet. It may be childish idealism to you, but to me it is the future – our children and their

children after them. I'm going with Blake, and if you had anything other than a calculator where your heart should be you'd come with us."

"Unfortunately, I don't. I shall be staying here with Vila and Jenna."

"Not with me," said Jenna quietly, "this time I'm going along with Blake."

Vila was smiling. Blake's mind was racing. He needed Avon with him on this trip. He needed the man's genius. The Axtrans valued technological skills above all else.

Blake shrugged. "All right, Cally, tell them."

Blake turned his back on the group. He dare not risk any kind of signal. He just hoped that Cally would pick it up.

Cally's voice was hesitant at first. "On Saurian Major we had an Axtran with us. I was with him when we attacked a communications outpost. A Federation guard shot him through the head. He died in my arms." Cally looked up. Vila was interested at least.

"Before he died he told me where to contact the Axtran rebels should I ever need to." Blake turned round again. The relief he felt that Cally had understood him did not show in his face. Cally did not look at Blake. Instead she looked at Avon. "He also told me that the stories of the Axtran treasures are true."

"We've enough treasure on this ship to make every single one of us rich for the rest of our days," said Avon. "The trouble is, we've nowhere to spend it."

"We'll need every bit of wealth we can get," said Blake. "We're going to find ourselves in situations where the only way out is to buy our freedom. Axtran treasure would be very persuasive."

Avon laughed again, but this time his laugh was one of resignation. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it matter? I hadn't got anything planned for tomorrow anyway."

"Zen, set a course for Axtra. We beam down one hour after arrival."

Kord was feeling worse. The rash was spreading over his body. He had an infection in one eye. He felt so weak he could hardly stand. The only thing strong about him was the grip of his hand on the box. How long

had he been running now? Two days? Three? He felt like giving himself up to the Federation patrol. He felt like lying down and waiting for some jungle animal to eat him.

But he couldn't. The thing in the box wouldn't let him. He moved forward through the thick, humid jungle.

Suddenly Kord was in a clearing. Five paces before, he had thought he was completely surrounded by foliage. Now he was at the edge of the clearing. And what he saw made the archaeologist stand in awe. He was standing at the edge of an ancient Axtran city. There were long rectangular pools divided by causeways that led to a huge complex of temples and palaces in the centre. There were finely carved steps, great stone blocks and statues.

Statues: there were hundreds of them, lining the causeways, all identical. Kord took them to be likenesses of some ancient Axtran religious figure. The highly polished stone glinted in the sunlight. The statues were of a man in ceremonial robes carrying a kind of mace. Kord listened for signs of life. There were none.

But what was that? Something was flickering on the causeway. Shapes seemed

to be appearing.

Kord rubbed his eyes. He had enough to cope with without hallucinating. He looked again. Yes! There were shapes. Human shapes, five of them, appearing on the causeway out of nothing. Kord drew back into the undergrowth and watched . . . and listened.

"Thank goodness Zen was right about this place," whispered Blake to Cally. And then, louder, "And now we've got to find out if there's anyone around."

Blake stepped forward along the causeway, heading for the temples. He felt one of the flagstones depress slightly beneath his foot. He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and looked up in time to see one of the statues swinging round at him.

There was no time to duck. The mace the statue had in his hands struck Blake on the shoulder and sent him toppling into the pool. Immediately from the other end of the pool there was a disturbance under the water, and Jenna caught her breath with fear as she saw three large dark shapes speeding through the water to the place where Blake had fallen in.

"Get him out of there!" she cried, pulling out her pistol and blasting at the closest of the shapes. The water boiled, and out of the bubbling, foaming liquid a huge head appeared, making hideous noises. The head itself was like that of a crocodile, but the body, writhing and twisting in pain was like that of a huge snake. As the creature reared up out of the water a second one appeared by the side of it and dug its teeth deep into its neck. A violent, bloody battle began.

But there was no time to stand and watch. The other shape was nearing Blake, and Gan could see other shapes coming across the

pool. He joined Cally and Jenna on the edge of the causeway and started firing as Blake struggled to the side.

Avon pulled Blake up by the shoulder, using only one hand. The other was firing his gun at the nearest shape. As he pulled Blake onto the causeway, a huge head broke the surface, barely five yards from where Avon stood.

Avon caught the creature right between the eyes. There were more grotesque shrieking noises, the creature opened its mouth wide and it seemed to Avon that he was staring right down the creature's throat. There was a fetid smell, mingled with burning flesh, and the creature fell forward across the causeway, jaws snapping aimlessly as the life slowly left its body.

As Blake got shakily to his feet more of the creatures dragged the dead one back into the water. He stared at the boiling, thrashing mass of blood and water.

"Thanks."

In the undergrowth, Kord had watched the scene fearfully. He did not want to show himself. He did not want to try and cross the causeways. He did not even really want to live, but he knew the box wouldn't let him die . . . at least not until it had found another victim.

Without any will of his own left to speak of, he stepped forward and hailed the five figures on the causeway.

They stood and waited for him as he crawled along the causeway towards them, lying flat on his face as the statues swished through the air above him.

Jenna went forward to help him.

"Don't touch him, Jenna," said Avon. "Look at his face. It might be contagious."

Avon threw a bottle of water towards Kord. The archaeologist drank greedily.

"It's not contagious," he said, placing the stopper back in the neck of the bottle and rolling it back towards Avon. Avon let it lie. "It's a disease carried by a form of flea found only on Axtran. In its early stages it can be easily cured."

"Do you know where we can contact the Axtran rebels?" Blake's experience with the monsters in the pool had snapped none of his enthusiasm.

Kord seemed amazed. "Any Axtran you meet is a rebel. The whole planet is in uproar.

Work has stopped in the mines and there is fighting everywhere. The Federation is calling for back-up ships to come and burn the planet up. They've had enough."

"And the Axtrans?"

"They're going to fight to the death. That's why there's no one here."

"Do you know anything about a Professor Noirama?"

"Renegade scientist, rumoured to have made startling breakthroughs in time manipulation? Yes. The Federation have got him. They won't get anything from him though."

"Is he dead?"

"No, he's not dead, though he might as well be. When he discovered that the Federation knew where he was he erased his own mind."

"He what?"

"He erased his own mind. All of it. He didn't want the Federation to get hold of any of his knowledge. He was well prepared. He turned himself into a living vegetable."

Avon thought of the proud old man he had met briefly at a scientific convention before his arrest. He remembered the sparkle in the damp, blue eyes, the laugh in the voice. Avon had pumped the professor for information about his experiments, but the old boy had given nothing away.

"Where are they keeping him?" Blake asked.

"In Acalta, the capital."

"Then we're going to get him."

"Wait a minute, Blake," said Avon, "you've just heard that the old man can't tell them anything."

"If they get him away from this planet they'll be able to make him. After all, I should know something about memory erasure." Blake fingered his teleport bracelet. "We're going back to the Liberator, and then we're

going down to Acalta." He tossed a bracelet to Kord. "Are you coming with us?"

Kord wanted to say no. He wanted to tell them about the thing in the box. He wanted to warn them, to tell them to leave him here. But the thing in the box was too strong for him. It had lain dormant for thousands of years. Now he had given it life again, and the taste of life was too sweet for the thing to give up. He put the bracelet on his wrist.

"What's in the box?" Avon was eyeing the mysterious symbols on the side. If this guy knew anything about the whereabouts of the treasure he might come in useful. He held out his hand to Kord.

"Don't touch it!" Kord shrank back. His other hand moved to his pistol.

"All right, all right. Stop squabbling, we've got work to do. We're beaming up now, so forget about the box for a while."

But Avon could not forget the look in Kord's eye when he'd asked to see the box. That man was hiding something, something pretty valuable. And if it was valuable he wanted to have it. As they materialised on board the Liberator he was already working on a plan to get it.

Blake collected more weapons and they beamed down. It was night time in Acalta, but he knew the Federation guards would be on alert. He had wanted to leave Kord behind, but the archaeologist had insisted on coming. Blake did not have time to argue, besides, he wanted someone who knew the area.

"Where are they keeping him?", he whispered.

"In the next building along."

Keeping to the shadows they made their way along the street. There was a sentry on the corner. Blake motioned Gan to his side. Gan looked at Blake and nodded. He slipped forward into the night. One quick blow would render the guard unconscious.

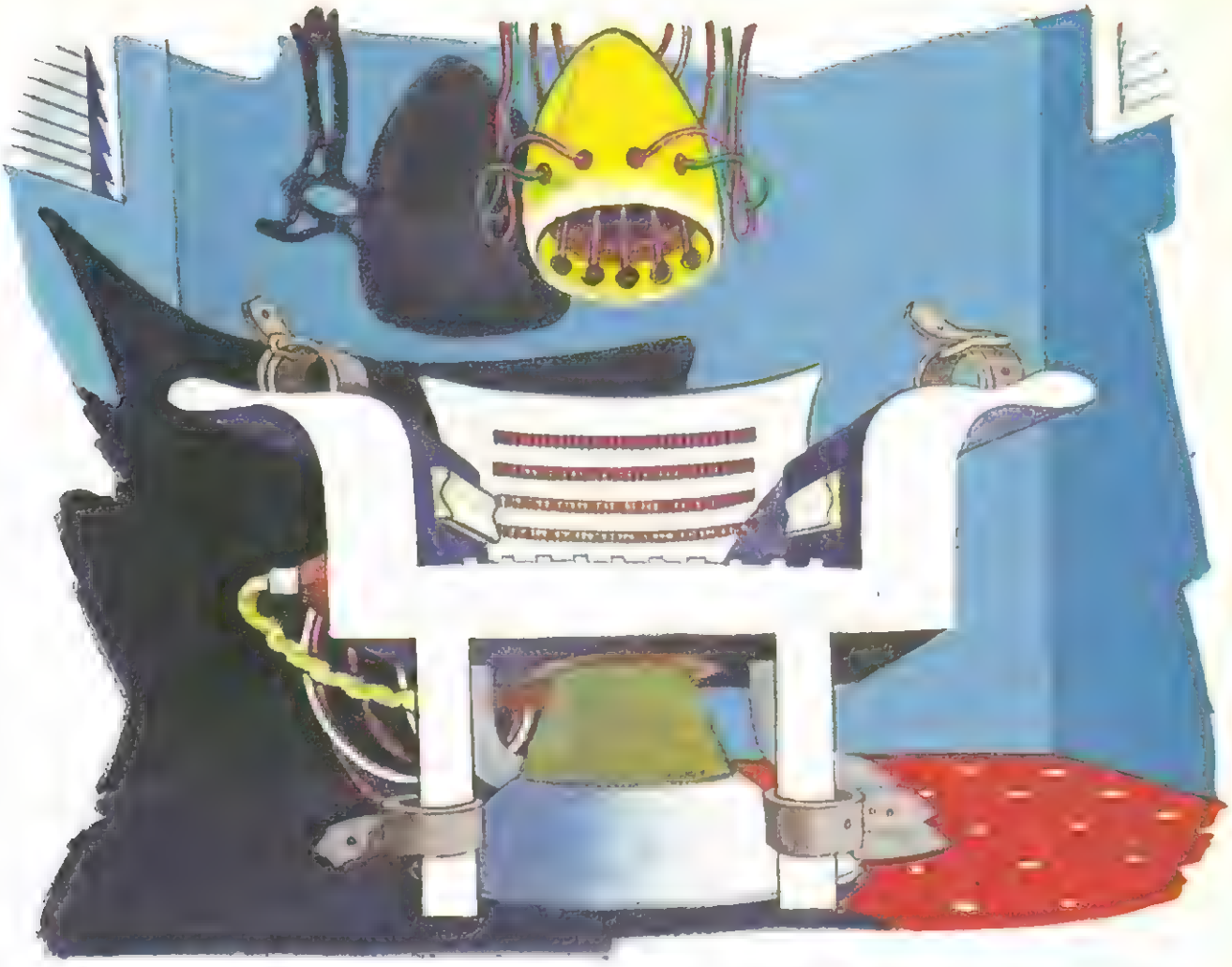
The others listened in the darkness. There was a dull thud and Gan returned, with the guard draped over his shoulder. They left him in a doorway and moved on.

At the next corner two guards were talking quietly. Gan and Blake crept up behind them. Blake's foot kicked a stone. One of the guards turned. He shouted something to his companion.

A brilliant light flashed down from the top of a building across the street. The others watched as the light caught Gan and Blake standing by the guards, their arms upraised, ready to strike them unconscious. For a moment they seemed frozen in time and then, before Blake could deliver his blow the guard fell senseless and a huge hunk of wall by his head was ripped out. The second guard jerked and fell. Their companions in the Federation had opened fire.

Avon put the light out with one shot, but it was already too late. The place was swarming with Federation guards. Lights were coming on all over the place, sweeping the streets. He saw Gan and Blake caught in one beam, and suddenly the doorway in which he was standing was flooded with light.

They were trapped. Avon looked down the street at Blake. Blake raised his hands above his head. The firing stopped. Avon dropped his pistol to the floor and raised his hands.



Next to him, Cally lifted her gun to fire. Avon knocked it from her hand with a karate chop.

"Coward!" she spat.

"Fool," he replied.

They were taken into the building where Professor Noirama was being kept. The guards led them down into the laboratory where all questioning was done. The professor was there, strapped into a seat with electrodes attached to his head.

Blake was alarmed by his appearance. The Federation scientists had restored his mind, or part of it at least. The professor was reciting simple mathematical formulae, like a child repeating nursery rhymes. A machine was recording everything he said. Maybe they were already too late.

"Ah, some more prisoners for questioning." The man who spoke had the pasty face of someone who had spent too long inside among chemicals. The eyes were small and lifeless, hardened by years of questions and experiments.

Blake knew his type. They did not reason, they never asked why. Nothing was too revolting for them to attempt. They just obeyed orders, like they had obeyed the order to wipe his own memory clean.

"Please sit down." The scientist led Jenna to a hard plastic seat surrounded by wires. There were thick leather straps on the arms and legs, and at the back there was a large helmet.

Jenna looked at Blake for guidance. Blake nodded. Jenna sat down.

It was no use trying anything now, Blake decided. He would die rather than undergo Federation 'treatment' again, but if he was going to have to die, he would leave it to the last possible moment.

"This can be as painless as you choose it to be," said the scientist. "We shall ask you a few questions, and then we can measure the

truth of your response on these instruments. He strapped Jenna's right wrist to the arm of the chair. "Should your answers prove less than satisfactory, we shall have to put the helmet on. It's messy I know, and it doesn't leave much for any relatives you might have but —"

KABOOM!

Hard lumps of stone fell from the ceiling and the building shook. Before Blake could act, the guard nearest him had drawn his gun and was backing to the doorway, keeping them all under cover.

KABOOM!

The rumble of the explosions echoed through the laboratory, one after another. The Axtrans were attacking in force. Blake looked around him. All the guards had their weapons drawn. He looked at Gan, who was twitching the muscle in his cheek. Not now. Soon – but not now.

Another guard came to the door.

"Axtrans, and they outnumber us. We're getting out. Bring the prisoners."

The scientist began to unstrap Professor Noirama. Gan held Avon back from trying to jump him.

Kord clutched the box to his chest and looked around him in wonder. Perhaps now he could finally die. Perhaps now at last he could rid himself of the box and the thing inside it.

The ceiling came down so fast that they barely had time to hear the Axtran bomb that had caused it to fall. There was no heat, no jet of wind; only dust, scientific equipment, bricks, beams, guards, and large pieces of stone. One piece struck Kord on the shoulder and knocked him to the ground. As he flung his arm out involuntarily a beam fell across it, pinning it to the floor.

Blake felled the scientist with one blow. He hurled a glass full of chemicals at the two guards. They screamed and clutched their faces.

Avon picked up their guns and started firing. The guards fell.

Blake shouted to Gan and the young man mountain whirled round and knocked a guard to the floor. The last surviving guard fled to get reinforcements.

Blake took a teleport bracelet and moved towards the professor. A cry from Kord made him stop. He saw Avon bending down, reaching for the box in Kord's trapped hand.

"Blake! Stop him! Stop him!"

"Get back, Avon!"

But Avon would not be stopped. "I've not come through this to go back empty-handed. I'm taking this box!"

Blake levelled his gun at Avon.

"You won't shoot me, Blake."

"Why risk a handful of brains to find out?"

Avon was not sure. As he hesitated, Kord spoke out. He was dying. The thing in the box was losing its ability to control him. Soon Kord would be free.

"Don't take the box, don't take it. There's something inside it, something terrible. I found it in the ruins of an old Axtran temple. There's a terrible power in the box, a life force so strong that no one can deny it. If you take this box you will be a slave to the thing inside it."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Look at me. I was a Federation archaeologist three weeks ago. Then I found this thing. It has not been out of my hand since."

"But what is it?"

"Something from another world, another universe. Aliens visited Axtra tens of thousands of years ago. That's why they have developed differently from us. The box, the thing in it, is all that is left of that visiting party."

"But what does it do?"

"It is trying to return to its own planet. It lives through whoever holds it. The Axtrans knew it was dangerous. That's why they buried it. I found it in the hand of the skeleton of a young man. They had buried him alive. Believe me . . ." Kord was smiling, his eyes were growing dim, " . . . don't touch it . . . don't . . ."

Blake heard the sound of running feet. He turned his gun to what was left of the doorway and spoke into his communicator. "Vila, get us out of here."

Two guards appeared in the doorway. Blake shot them down. He could hear others running behind them. He fired another blast.

"No, Professor, no!"

Avon's warning came too late. The professor, still muttering his simple calculations, was taking the box from Kord's hand. He smiled. Yes, this was better than that strange emptiness that had been in his head for so long he couldn't remember. Throw the teleport bracelet away? Of course, why not? We'll be much safer with people who don't know our secret.

Blake and the others started to dematerialise. Avon watched the professor, and thought back to the man he had known.

Maybe Blake *had* something after all. The old boy had been all right. He didn't agree with all this risking your life, but as all five of them materialised safely into the teleport chamber on board the Liberator, he had to admit that putting a spanner in the Federation's works now and then did have a certain attraction.

On Axtra, Professor Noirama went quietly with the guard that found him. He clutched the box close to his chest. Yes, he would look after the box. He would try and get a rocket ship for the thing inside the box. And if he was killed while trying he could always hand the box over to someone else, someone with enough resources to help the thing get back to its home planet. Someone from the Federation. . . .

Space Warp

After a narrow escape from an ambush set by Space Colonel Travis of Federation Security, the Liberator has been forced into a space warp where time and space are distorted beyond human recognition.

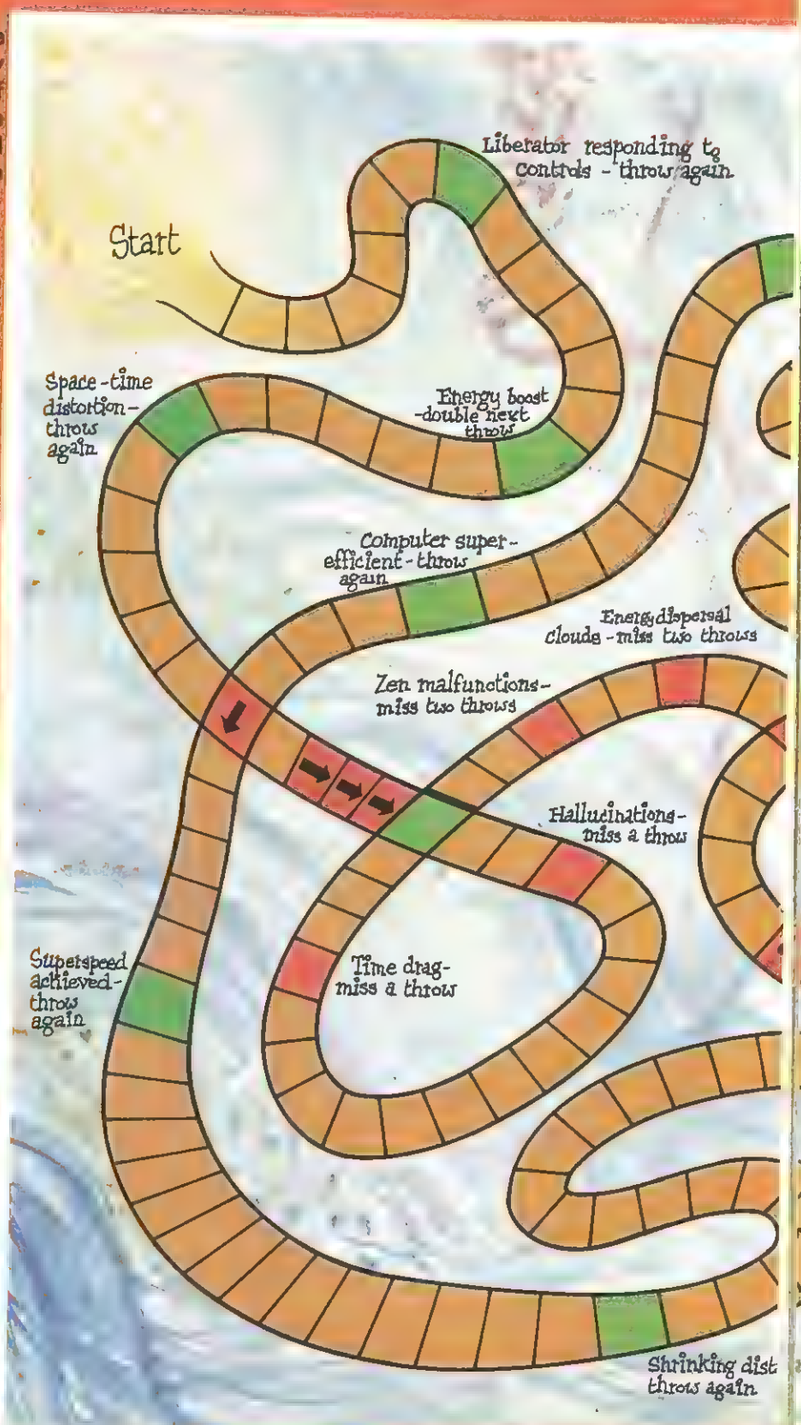
Will Blake's 7 escape from this terrible plight? Find out by playing the game.

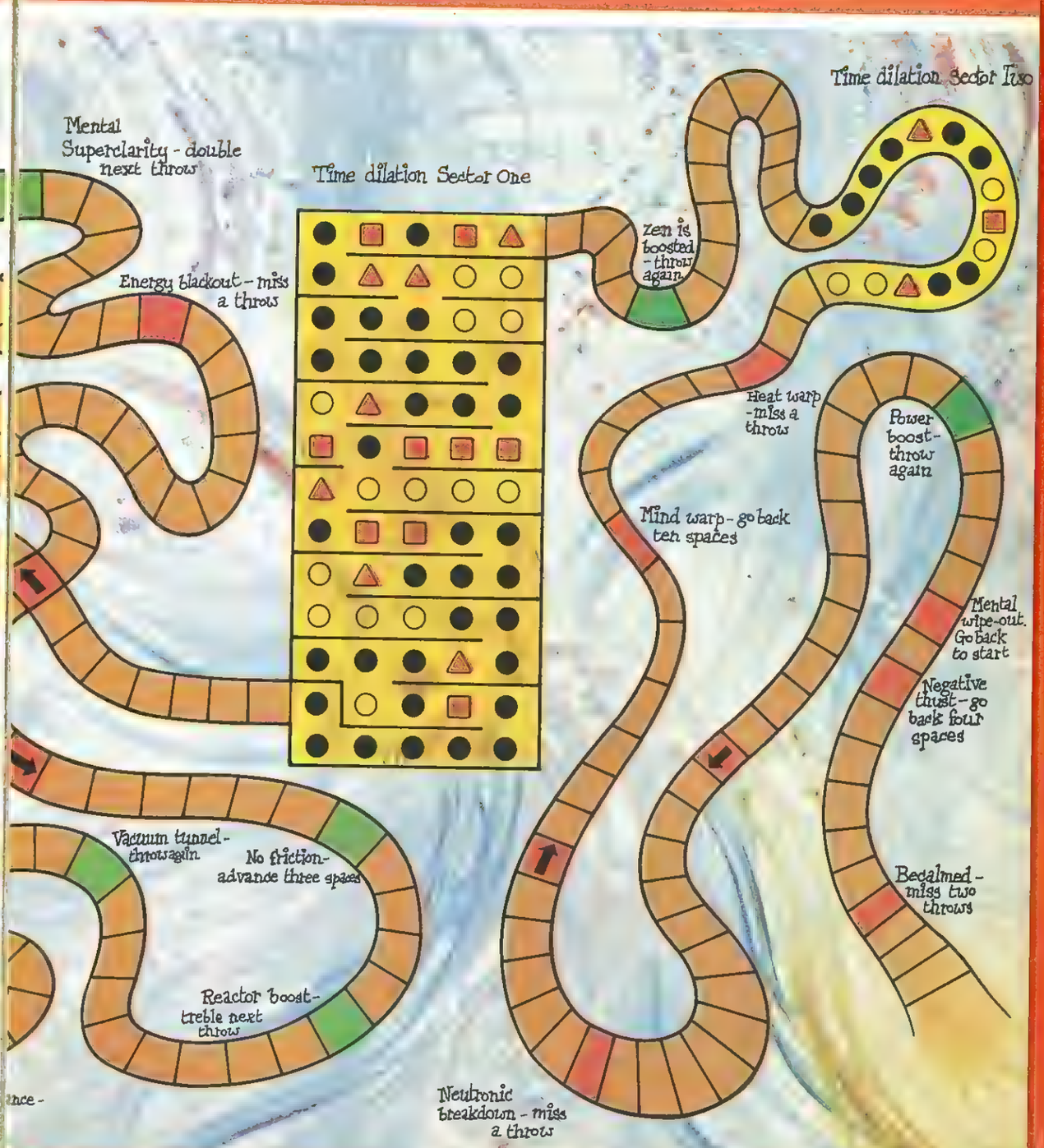
Each player has a counter and can move in any direction he likes, unless he is throwing while his counter is on a square containing an arrow. Players throwing while their counter is on an arrow must follow the direction of the arrow for the number of squares shown on the dice. If a player lands on a square containing instructions he must obey them.

Inside the Time Dilation sectors, each mark counts as a square. Any two players who finish their goes on the same mark inside the Time Dilation sectors must return to the start. The marks have different meanings:

- ● Normal square.
- ○ Throw again.
- △ Go back three spaces.
- ■ Miss a throw.

The winner is the first player to escape the space warp.


Start
Liberator responding to controls - throw again
Space-time distortion - throw again
Energy boost - double next throw
Computer super-efficient - throw again
Energy dispersal clouds - miss two throws
Zen malfunctions - miss two throws
Hallucinations - miss a throw
Time drag - miss a throw
Supetspeed achieved - throw again
Shrinking dist ance - throw again


Mental Supertarity - double next throw
Energy blackout - miss a throw
Time dilation Sector One
Time dilation Sector Two
Zen is boosted - throw again
Heat warp - miss a throw
Power boost - throw again
Mind warp - go back ten spaces
Mental wipe-out. Go back to start
Negative thust - go back four spaces
Becalmed - miss two throws
Vacuum tunnel - throw again
No friction - advance three spaces
Reactor boost - treble next throw
Neutronic breakdown - miss a throw

The Sima Experiment

Zen's lights glowed briefly, then began to flicker and flash as the circuits inside decoded the seemingly unintelligible series of hisses and bleeps they were receiving. Ever since Blake had discovered the orbiting relay station and cut into the Federation Communications System six hours before, Zen had been translating the coded messages and passing them on to Blake.

Blake ignored the routine meteorite warnings and the bulletins on magnetic field variations, but he recorded the troop movements that indicated an understrength force on Arxon, he logged the sudden extreme peculiarities of climate on Mang, and he made a welcome note of the armed insurrection on Metabessal.

Interesting as this information undoubtedly was, Blake knew it was not enough to bring the Liberator into action. The messages were by and large the usual routine exchanges from Federation Headquarters to the thousands of outposts in the skies. Blake was beginning to wonder if he could sell the others the idea of travelling all the way to Metabessal to lend a hand, when Zen spoke again, prefacing the message with the type of code used.

"HYPERCODE 3: FROM IGSHANG TO EARTH. ALL REFERENCE TO THE PLANET SIMA TO BE ERASED. PLANET TO BE REFERRED TO AS IBAL – UNSUITABLE FOR HUMAN HABITATION. ALL REFERENCE TO THE SIMA EXPERIMENT TO BE ERASED. PLANET SIMA HAS CEASED TO EXIST. EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY."

Blake was thoughtful. Hypercode 3 was top priority. Sima was in the Vankan solar system and they had passed within fifty spacials of it two days before. He asked Zen for a rundown on the planet. Zen's lights came to life as the talking computer selected the relevant information from its memory banks.

"AGE: 5,500,000,000 YEARS. SURFACE AREA 214,000,000 ACRONS. LAND/SEA RATIO 1:8. ATMOSPHERE: 1.2 EARTH NORMAL. ORBITAL SPEED: 60,000 A.M.L. SURFACE TEMPERATURE: 45.4 B – 69.9 B. POPULATION: 25,000,000."

"Anything to suggest they've had some kind of major catastrophe?"

There was a short pause as Zen checked the orbital variations in the Vankan System.

"NEGATIVE."

Blake was still rubbing his chin when Jenna came up beside him.

"Got anything good?"

Blake passed her a sheet of thin shiny material where he had noted down the information.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

Jenna studied the Federation message, then glanced quickly over the statistics about Sima. She placed the sheet down and looked over Blake's shoulder at the screen which showed a moving map of the solar system in which Sima maintained its orbit. She pointed to one circular shape moving in a slow circle round a bright light.

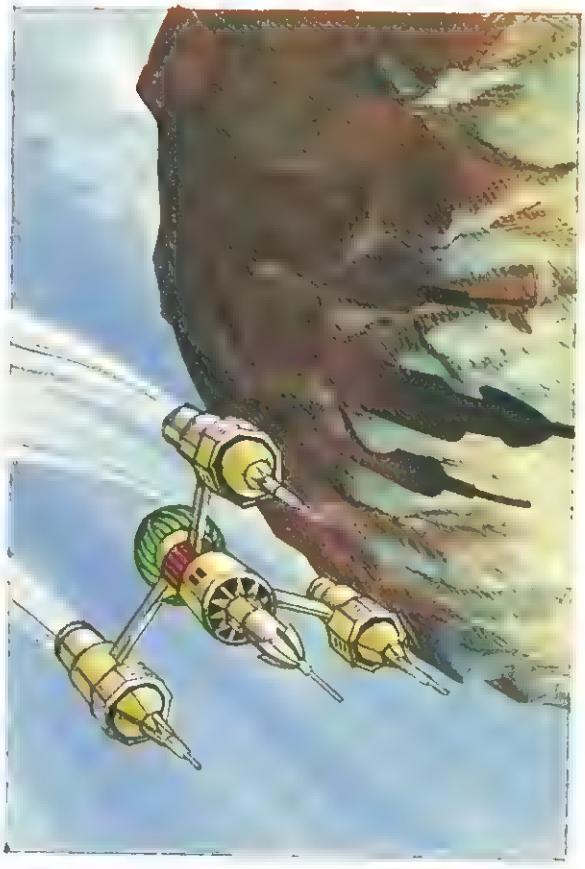
"By the information, I'd say that's it. It's just like Earth."

Blake nodded.

"A little older, bigger and hotter, and a lot less populated, but yes, the similarities are remarkable. This planet here," he pointed to another smaller circle slightly further away from the bright light, "would seem to be Igshang."

Zen sparkled into life.

"CORRECT."



Jenna turned away from the screen. "And it's still there?"

Blake gestured back at the screen. "Obviously."

"Then why don't we take a look?"

Blake smiled. "Why not? Zen, set a course for Sima."

Shortly afterwards, the Liberator was in orbit around the planet Sima. The blue-green, cloud-covered planet awakened a feeling of homesickness in Blake. Except for the presence of two small moons, he might well have been looking down on Earth itself.

"Have you checked for viruses, radiation?"

"AFFIRMATIVE. PLANET HABITABLE. NO PROTECTIVE CLOTHING REQUIRED."

"Is there any sign of life down there?"

"AFFIRMATIVE. HUMAN, ANIMAL, VEGETABLE."

Blake thought hard. What if the Federation Communications System he had cut into had an anti-tampering device that had warned the Federation? Had they had enough time to set up a trap on Sima then send out the message? It seemed unlikely. Surely his behaviour wasn't that predictable. Then

again, the Federation had complete psychological breakdowns on all his crew except Cally.

"Well, are we going or aren't we?" It was Cally speaking.

Jenna was whispering to Vila and Avon. Blake went over to the small group.

"What do you think?"

Vila and Avon seemed indifferent. Jenna was more positive.

"It's a chance," she said. "If they're prepared to write off a whole planet it means they must be scared of something. Maybe we can use that to our advantage."

Zen broke into Blake's thoughts.

"FEDERATION SPACESHIP ASSUMING ORBIT ROUND SIMA."

Cally looked puzzled.

"What's it for?"

"I don't know, maybe it's some kind of guard."

"PROJECTILE LAUNCHED SECTOR SIX ON SIMA. TRACKING ON SCREEN. E.T.A. IN ORBIT TWELVE MINUTES TWO SECONDS. FEDERATION SPACESHIP CHANGING COURSE TO INTERCEPT."

Blake acted swiftly.

"Get us there first, Zen – we want that projectile."

"IMPOSSIBLE. FEDERATION SPACESHIP WILL ARRIVE SIXTEEN SECONDS EARLIER."

"Then let's get ready to fight."

The Liberator came upon the Federation ship as it was taking what seemed to be a small satellite on board. The Federation ship took immediate evasive action. The Liberator opened fire. A small ball of orange light glowed on the ship's stabilisers then spread swiftly and silently over the whole craft.

There was a brief, bright flare, then the space ahead was empty except for some small pieces of debris.

"Let's pick up the satellite."

Gan stepped forward.

"You want me to go out and get it?"

"No need, Gan – Zen says it's made of metal."

The Liberator manoeuvred carefully alongside the satellite. The gleaming door to the hold slid slowly back and two grappling cables snaked outwards and attached their magnetic locks to the satellite. Blake activated the cable return and the satellite was reeled back into the hold.

"How is it for contamination and radiation?"

"SATELLITE SAFE TO HANDLE."

Blake took Avon with him and went down into the hold to examine the satellite. Avon listened to the satellite, then unscrewed a partition on the top and peered inside.

"Crude, but effective," he said quietly, looking at the maze of printed circuits and the tangles of superfine wire. He cut away some of the wires and then reached inside and pulled out a green box. He unscrewed the front and removed a coil of wire from inside.

"It's a kind of emergency satellite. Rather like the flares ancient mariners used to use when in trouble at sea."

"And that?" Blake nodded at the thin coil of brown wire.

Avon smiled. "This is the message in the bottle. Once we run this through the decoder we'll know a lot more about the mysterious planet of Sima."

Blake and Avon returned to the flight deck and fed the coil into Zen's decoding and translating units. Within seconds, Zen's flat, featureless voice filled the room.

"AQUATIC RESEARCH STATION CALLING BASE. WE HAVE RECEIVED NO COMMUNIQUES FOR SIX WEEKS. THE SITUATION HERE IS DESPERATE. SUPPLIES ARE LOW. THE SIMA EXPERIMENT RESULTS ARE READY. NOT CERTAIN WE CAN LAST ANOTHER NIGHT. SEND HELP IMMEDIATELY."

Blake looked at his crew. He was surprised to see that the message hadn't discouraged Avon and Vila from their rather passive stand.

"Zen, did you pinpoint where the rocket was launched?"

"SECTOR SIX. TWELVE BY EIGHTEEN POINT FOUR."

Blake checked the readings on the scanner. The rocket had been launched from a small island just off Sima's largest landmass. He watched the shadow of night creeping slowly across the ocean towards the island. It would be dark on the island in less than an hour, and the man had said he wasn't certain they could last another night . . .

It was Cally who, uncharacteristically, sounded the first note of caution.

"Are you sure we want to get involved in this? For all we know that Federation ship may have been coming to the rescue."

"Or it may have been coming to make sure no distress signals from the planet could be heard by freighters." Jenna seemed convinced.

Blake wondered aloud why she was so sure.

Avon answered him. "Don't bother about why, but we're prepared to go with you – on one condition."

"And that is?"

"That after we finish investigating whatever it is that's going on at this Aquatic Research Station, you beam us down onto another sector of the planet."

Blake was unsure. "What for?"

Vila, Avon and Jenna exchanged glances.

"That's our business," Avon answered.

"It's a deal."

It was dusk when they beamed down into a small concrete enclosure in the middle of a thick, humid jungle. They could hear the sea lapping the shore nearby, but they couldn't see it because of the thickness of the undergrowth. Blake led them towards the open door of the one storey building in the centre.

In the doorway he stopped and drew his weapon. Cautiously he moved inside. He was in a narrow, dimly lit corridor. Lights shone into the corridor from open doors on both sides. He listened. Nothing.

He moved down the corridor and entered the first room, sleeping quarters of some kind. There were three washbasins against the wall, two mirrors and three fold-out bunks. None of the bunks looked slept in.

"This is primitive," said Avon, "I'd nearly forgotten why I turned to crime."

Vila ran his fingers along the side of the uppermost bunk and looked at them with distaste. He spat on the end of his fingers and rubbed them against his trouser legs.

Blake moved on to the next room while Cally moved further up the corridor with Gan. Blake looked into a smaller room than the last. It contained one bunk covered with rumpled blankets. The bunk was lying in the middle of the floor and Blake could see where it had been pulled from the wall. Two large filing cabinets stood by the doorway as if someone had pulled them away in a hurry. There were empty food cans scattered over the floor.

"Blake!"

Blake ran up the corridor and joined Cally. She was standing in the wreckage of what had once been a laboratory. Cally put her forefinger to her lips.

Blake listened. He could hear a squelching sound. He wondered if it was coming from outside the building. A faint movement in the corner of the room caught his eye. He shone a beam in that direction and lit up the grey, shapeless, pulsating back of a living creature. As soon as the beam hit it, the creature reared up and turned round. Jenna cupped her hand to her mouth as she recognised the skeletal, white form the creature had been bending over as that of a human being.

"It's some kind of giant leech! Open up!"

As the creature moved with surprising speed towards them, they poured bolt after bolt of deadly radiation into its bloated body. As they backed out of the door it fell at their feet on its back, wriggled violently and then curled up in a ball and lay still.

They were still staring at it when they heard the scream.

"That came from outside! Let's go!"

They rushed outside and spread out across the front of the house. Something was coming towards them through the jungle. They took up firing positions and trained their weapons at the area of jungle the sounds were coming from.

The large fronds of a tropical plant were thrown back and a man dashed into the clearing. He fell to his knees, turned his head at the sounds following him in the jungle, then began crawling towards the open door of the building.

"Hold your fire!"

Blake had hardly given the order when the undergrowth parted once again and a huge form stopped on the edge of the concrete square. Blake squinted in the darkness. The man on his knees struggled to get to his feet and the creature shot across the square towards him, its long, hard, spidery legs scraping and scrabbling along the concrete floor.

They opened fire and in the light of their onslaught they saw that the creature was a giant crab. Blake shot one of its eyes off its

stalk. The crab hesitated for a second while other shots glanced off its rough spotted shell. It waved its claws aimlessly in front of its face and started forward again, its peculiar jerky movements belieing its speed.

"The eye! Get the other eye!"

They opened fire again, aiming for the one remaining eye. A strange, sudden sound like the squeaking of a cork in a bottle told them they had hit home, but still the crab blundered towards them. Blake picked up the man from the ground and pulled him inside the building. He carried him to the first room they had entered and laid him on one of the bunks.

"What's going on?" he demanded roughly.

The man looked at him with relief. "So you've come. I thought the others would have warned you off. I thought you would have put this whole planet in quarantine."

"What others? What's been happening?"

Blake watched the hope die in the man's eyes.

"Y – you're not from the Federation, are you?"

The window suddenly splintered and a large claw came waving into the room, clicking ominously. Blake picked up a pillow and threw it at the claw. The claw pinched shut and the pillow fell to the floor in two pieces. Blake opened fire but the shots seemed to bounce off the mottled shell. He ducked under the waving claw and started pumping shot after shot into the soft part of the crab's face. The speed with which the crab withdrew its claw from the window almost caught him by surprise. As it was, he was able to avoid serious injury by diving to the floor.

When the crab had gone he resumed questioning. The man's answers were lifeless, dull, resigned.

Blake listened impatiently as the story of the Sima experiment unfolded.

"It was to have been the Federation's greatest triumph. It was to have made the Vankan solar system the trade centre of the universe. Professor Sang had developed a serum that would mutate living creatures into giants. Just think of it – limitless food for everyone."

"Professor Sang?"

"He's here somewhere. In the lab, I think.

The first results were outstandingly successful. All six of us could have lived for months off one sardine if we had wished. We had prawns the size of horses."

"What happened?" Blake walked to the door and looked down the corridor. The others were still firing away into the night.

"The serum got out of control. How or why I don't know, but it wasn't long before the crabs started coming out of the sea. They were hungry, and they weren't alone. We were under siege from leeches and lugworms. The north shore was littered with huge rotting carcasses of what had once been tiny anemones. After Vax was killed by a crab we drew lots to see who would take the spaceship to escape. Professor Sang and I lost."

"But why haven't the Federation come back here? Surely this invention is worth persevering with?"

The man looked down at the floor.

"No. When the creatures mutated their organic balance altered. No two pieces of flesh were alike. Those of us who had eaten it suffered terribly. The effects were erratic, but almost always they were harmful. Sang went mad a week ago, and heaven knows what prompted Vax to sabotage the chemical plant where the serum was made."

"Then how come you're all right?"

The man rose to his feet. New fires of determination burned in the dark eyes above his sunken cheeks.

"I haven't eaten for a month. The effects wear off in that time." He took two halting steps towards the door. "Yes, it was to have been a blessing and now it's a curse. I have cursed this planet to eternal quarantine. I have cursed its inhabitants to countless lifetimes of fear, running and hiding from the huge animals that are even now spreading across the seas. Their whole way of life will be irrevocably changed."

"Is that such a bad thing? At least now they'll have to think for themselves, fight for themselves, learn to live without the Federation."

The man was walking towards the door at the end of the corridor. The others had stopped firing and were staring into the darkness, listening for the sound of the giant crab stumbling blinded through the undergrowth.

Blake held the man's arm and drew the others' attention.

"There's nothing we can do here. We're beaming up."

At that moment there was a noise like an old-fashioned jet engine warming up. The night echoed to some terrible, swift battle going on in the undergrowth. A long, black shape flicked up against the night above the top of the trees, and then vanished. The sounds grew louder. The undergrowth was suddenly flattened as a giant sea snake rolled into the clearing, locked in battle with the blind crab. The crab had one claw round the sea snake's neck and was trying to dislodge the writhing reptile's teeth from its shell. The snake's tale whiplashed at incredible speed.

The man walked towards the battling giants with a gentle smile on his face. The roaring hiss of the snake seemed like music to him. These creatures were his own creations.

Cally went forward to drag him back, but Blake stopped her.

"Let him be, we're going up."

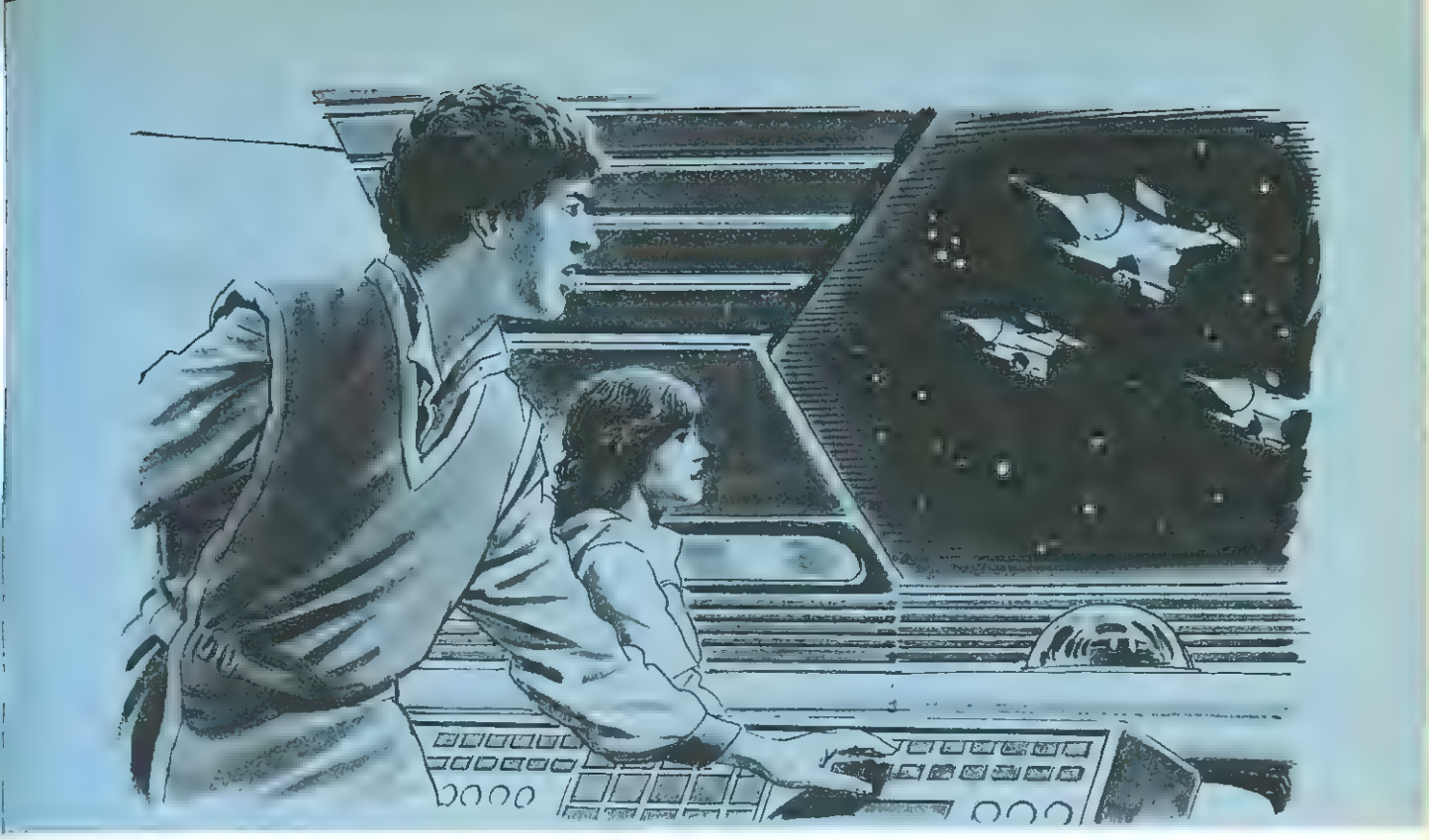
On board the Liberator, Blake pulled out some maps of the surface of Sima. He spread them on the table.

"Now, you three, where would you like to go? If Zen's information is correct this area here was a favourite with smugglers." He pointed to a small city by an inland lake. "That's what you're after, isn't it, Jenna? Something you knew to be hidden here?"

Jenna didn't blush. Blake continued in his bantering tone.

"One hour should do it – I believe that's what we agreed on. Of course, none of us are obligated to go with you and that place is just crawling with giant mutations, so I'd advise you to pack a weapon or two along with the sandwiches. What kind would you like, by the way? Crab?"

Jenna couldn't help laughing, and after the others had been slapping their thighs for a minute or so, even Avon raised a smile.



Mother Ship

"Where are we going?" Jenna studied Blake's face closely as he bent over the auto-navigation system. His face showed no emotion, though the corners of his eyes were creased with concentration.

"Eklos," he said simply.

"Eklos?" repeated Avon indignantly. "I thought that we discussed wherever we were going. We don't all share your megalomanic dreams, Blake."

Blake continued poring over the flickering lights on the auto-navigation screen.

"We're going to Eklos," he said calmly. "They've had a strong resistance movement there ever since the Federation refused their independence claims in the second calendar. If Zen's reading of the Federation troop build-up in that sector of space is correct, it looks like they're going to need some help."

Vila joined the discussion.

"What's in it for us? How come we're expected to obey you but you won't do anything for us? This ship is meant to be democratically run."

Blake raised himself to his full height and turned to face Vila and Avon.

"Always the same old arguments. Sometimes I think you do it on purpose." He rubbed his forehead impatiently with his left hand as if mentally counting to ten. "Look, as I've told you before, this ship is democratically run, but I'm the boss. If you don't like it, I'll put you down on the nearest habitable planet."

"All right, all right, but these schemes of yours just –"

"Spaceships approaching in formation. E.T.A. at this point two minutes." Cally's voice cut across the argument as she carefully studied three dots on the small screen in front of her. She turned a switch and the dots grew larger. She didn't have to study them long before she knew what kind of ships they were. Her voice was soft as she turned to Blake. "It looks like Travis and his boys."

Blake immediately switched off the auto-nav.

"Man your stations. Prepare for immediate evasive action."

Avon stared at him in disbelief.

"You're using the manual controls while

Travis is right on our tail? Are you mad or something?"

"Man your station, Avon. I'm sick of all this bickering. Either you pull your weight or we're in trouble. The auto-nav stays off."

"You'd have made a wonderful officer in the Federation Cadets, did you know that?" Avon's sarcasm was thinly veiled.

He sauntered to his control section and began working the switches.

"E.T.A. thirty-nine seconds." Cally's voice was cool.

Blake counted off the seconds in his head as he adjusted the large dial in front of him until two red, undulating lines on the navigaide screen merged as one. He flicked a switch with his right hand and pulled a lever with his left.

"Boost primaries. Forward thrust." Vila, Avon and Jenna began working their controls. "Set course 238. Speed: time distort two. Let's go!"

The Liberator sped away through the blackness of space. Cally watched the dots go smaller on her screen.

"Pursuit craft leaving scanner range."

Blake nodded in answer and kept his hands firmly on the controls. After two full minutes when each man and woman did their separate jobs to perfection, he ordered them to stop.

"Cut primaries. Reverse thrust. Negative anti-grav. Stabilise and trim to stationary. Compensate for star system's orbital drift and then hold."

He repressed a smile as his orders were carried out to the letter. These men and women might be criminals, but they knew how to fly a spaceship. He listened contentedly to the sound of the Liberator's engines running down.

"All confirmed?"

"All confirmed."

"Set scanners and etheric beam detectors at maximum range. I want a three-sixty spherical survey."

Zen's lights began flashing and flickering. Blake watched patiently until the activity died down.

"PROJECTILE SECTOR SIX. FOURTEEN PER CENT OPTIMUM."

All of them crowded round the large scanner screen. Nothing could be seen except the usual clusters of stars.

"Where?"

"TWO MILLION SIX-FIFTY THREE SPACIALS."

"What is it?"

"ORIGIN UNKNOWN. PROJECTILE SUBJECT TO ORBITAL DRIFT. NO APPARENT MOTIVE POWER."

Blake switched on the auto-nav.

"Take us up close, Zen."

"Do you really think that's wise?"

Blake ignored Jenna's question. His eyes were fixed firmly on the large scanner screen.

"Size and make-up?"

Zen's lights flashed briefly.

"FIVE-THIRTY-SEVEN KILOGRAMS. NINETEEN PER-CENT COMPRESSED CARBON."

They watched the large scanner until a pin-prick of multi-coloured light came into view. It drifted slowly towards them, spinning on its own axis and reflecting every colour under the rainbow from its irregular surface.

Vila whistled softly under his breath. "It's a giant diamond!"

"One fifth of it is," Avon corrected him tersely. "But what's the rest of it made of?"

They stood gazing in awe at the giant egg-

shaped crystal as it drifted silently across their screen.

Blake turned from the screen and took the controls again. He set the Liberator on a parallel course and, with one eye still on the screen, he barked out the orders that woke them from their dreamlike states.

"Open locks on lower hold—we're taking it aboard."

Blake manoeuvred the ship carefully alongside the crystal. Gan donned a space-suit and attached lines round it. Blake kept the ship perfectly steady as the others pulled the giant diamond into the hold. He activated the door mechanism and switched off the anti-gravity. When the pressure in the hold stabilised, he left the controls and walked down to see just what it was they had taken aboard.

Vila was running his hands slowly over the surface of the huge, shiny-smooth, glittering crystal.

"It's beautiful," he repeated, several times.

Avon was less impressed with its aesthetic qualities. He drew a laser from his belt and began cutting a large chunk of the crystal away.

"No, stop it!"

"Shut up. There's something inside this diamond casing and I intend to find out what. It might be something even more valuable than diamonds."

"No, wait! We must discuss it! We must—"

Avon had switched off his laser cutter. He was staring at the deep cut he had made into the crystal. A thick, light brown fluid was dripping onto the floor of the hold, covering Avon's space boots. He did not notice. He had moved closer to the crystal and was pressing his face against it, straining to see inside, straining to penetrate the opaqueness at the centre of it.

There was a loud crack and he stepped back suddenly.

"I think we'd better get out of here," he said quietly, "this thing's alive!"

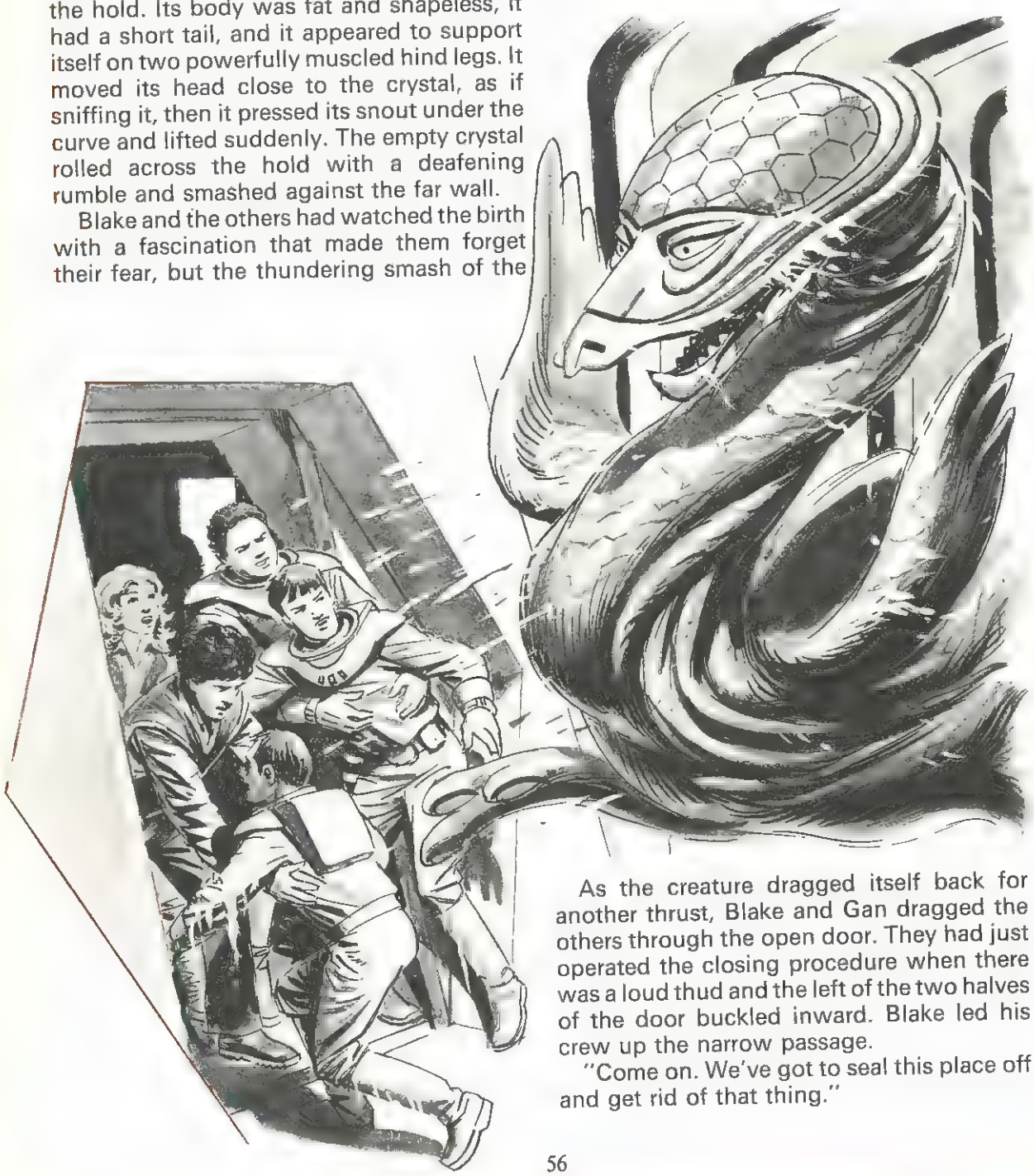
As the others looked at him in astonishment, there was another loud crack and a split appeared down the side of the giant diamond. Yet another crack was heard and great gouts of the brown fluid spilled from the fissure that appeared.

The crystal began to rock, and a large, wet, leathery-skinned head pushed away one section and forced its way out into the air of the hold. It flung its head back, and made

thin, piping noises from deep within its throat. Its eyes, which had been closed, slowly blinked open, and it looked alertly round, moving its head in a series of jerky, badly co-ordinated movements. It struggled violently inside the crystal, broke away another section at the top and succeeded in freeing two long, flat, flipper-like appendages. It placed these on the sides on the crystal and in one sudden, clumsy, but devastatingly powerful movement it hauled itself out and flopped loudly onto the floor of the hold. Its body was fat and shapeless, it had a short tail, and it appeared to support itself on two powerfully muscled hind legs. It moved its head close to the crystal, as if sniffing it, then it pressed its snout under the curve and lifted suddenly. The empty crystal rolled across the hold with a deafening rumble and smashed against the far wall.

Blake and the others had watched the birth with a fascination that made them forget their fear, but the thundering smash of the crystal against the wall of the hold woke them to their immediate danger.

Blake was activating the door mechanism when the sudden movements caught the creature's attention. It waddled two steps towards them, then dived forward, its neck seeming to stretch as it did so. Blake, Vila and Gan dived aside from this first clumsy thrust, but the creature's head knocked the other three over, and when its heavy neck slapped against the floor, all six of them were sprayed with drops of the thick brown fluid.



As the creature dragged itself back for another thrust, Blake and Gan dragged the others through the open door. They had just operated the closing procedure when there was a loud thud and the left of the two halves of the door buckled inward. Blake led his crew up the narrow passage.

"Come on. We've got to seal this place off and get rid of that thing."

They sealed off the hold passage and made their way back to the flight deck.

Blake felt pinpoints of heat all over his uncovered face. He looked at the others and noticed they were all rubbing their skin as if to get rid of some terrible itch. He touched one of the burning spots on his skin and held his hand up to his eye. There was a small smear of the thick brown fluid from inside the egg on the tip of his finger, and almost immediately he felt it beginning to burn. He could see that Avon, Jenna and Cally had been sprayed far worse than he had.

"Wash this stuff from your faces. I think it's some kind of acid."

Before he washed, Blake scraped a drop from his face, placed it on a plate of glass and fed it into the chemical analysis sector of the general computer, ordering Zen to analyse it and find the most effective counter should it prove harmful. He then went and washed his face thoroughly.

As he dried his face, Blake was amazed at how well he felt. He could hear Gan whistling beside him and he joined in. The burning had stopped and he experienced an immense feeling of wellbeing. He felt younger and stronger than he had done for a long time. His mind was clear and precise and free from worry. He looked at the others in his crew. Even Avon was smiling broadly.

Blake went to the controls and operated the hold door mechanism. Everything seemed so easy, so clear. He moved the Liberator sharply to one side and switched on the reconnaissance repair videos on the hull of the ship. As the screens flickered to life he could see the creature outside the hold. He searched for the button to close the hold doors. Where was it now? Ah, there it was.

He closed the doors and watched in fascination as the creature moved slowly round the ship, seeming to sniff it with its snout. It bumped gently against the hull.

Blake laughed. How sweet . . . the thing wanted to play. It thought the Liberator was its mother. Blake thought it would be good fun to have a game of hide-and-seek with the baby creature, have a friendly romp through space. He looked at the control panel, but it didn't seem to make sense to him. He didn't seem to understand what it was for. Still, there were lots of lovely lights and buttons, and it wouldn't do any harm to press just one . . .

"That's my cup!" Blake turned round suddenly to see Jenna and Avon arguing furiously over a small ornamental cup.

"No, it's not! It's mine! I saw it first!"

"Yes, but I've got it now. Finder's keeper's!"

Blake was puzzled. Gan sat in a chair staring into space, Vila paced up and down wiping his eyes, and Cally lay curled up in a ball on the floor, smiling. Blake walked over and touched her on the shoulder. She looked up at him with wide, smiling eyes.

"Ma-ma!"

Blake was shocked. He wasn't her mama . . . was he? Who was he then? It was on the tip of his tongue. He crossed his legs and sat

on the floor. All he needed was a little time and then he would remember.

Zen's lights flashed into life in the silent room.

"ANALYSIS REPORT. SUBSTANCE UNIQUE PRESERVATIVE FOR UNBORN SAURIAN DRAGONS. ENABLES THEM LIMITLESS INCUBATION PERIOD. CONTACT WITH HUMAN SKIN MEANS REVERSION TO CHILDHOOD. UNLESS PROCESS IS REVERSED DEATH OCCURS."

Zen's lights flashed once again and a tray carrying six small cups slid out of the wall.

"EXPOSED SUBJECTS MUST DRINK ANTIDOTE WITHIN ONE HOUR OF CONTAMINATION. REPEAT: EXPOSED SUBJECTS MUST DRINK ANTIDOTE WITHIN ONE HOUR OF CONTAMINATION."

Blake looked at the pretty flashing lights and the lovely green liquid in the cups. He could hear noises but he didn't know what they meant. He wanted to go over and have a drink from one of the cups, but he didn't know how. His legs wouldn't do what they wanted them to. Maybe if he crawled . . .

"REPEAT: EXPOSED SUBJECTS MUST DRINK ANTIDOTE WITHIN ONE HOUR OF CONTAMINATION. REPEAT: EXPOSED SUBJECTS MUST DRINK ANTIDOTE WITHIN ONE HOUR OF CONTAMINATION. REPEAT . . ."

Blake heard the noises over and over again. Maybe he could make noises like that. Maybe he could make those funny sounds. He opened his mouth and moved his tongue.

"Ga-ga."

Space Colonel Travis stared hard at the magnificent spaceship lying motionless in the blackness of space on the scanner. There was no sign of life at all. He scratched at the inside corner of his eye with his forefinger. Was it a trap? Had they all been struck down by some deadly disease? He didn't know.

Still, he didn't want to destroy the Liberator. If he could capture that as well as Blake and his gang, he would be the biggest hero in the Federation. He pondered the problem a little longer. It would be safer to blast the Liberator out of the sky, but if Blake and his men were already dead, it would be a terrible waste of a fine ship.

"Prepare to open fire!" His order was curt and his androids moved swiftly into action. "Set weapons at ten per cent. If they're capable of resistance they'll do something. If they're not, we'll board her."

Travis's androids prepared to fire. Out of sight, on the far side of the ship, the creature from the diamond crystal was still probing, trying to get some maternal response from the huge spaceship.

"Gunners two and three, report your position."

"Target in sights. Ready to fire."

"FIRE!"

The androids pressed their buttons and two laser bolts of pure energy streaked

toward the Liberator. The aim was true and Space Colonel Travis watched in satisfaction as the super-ship he had been hunting for so long rocked under the impact. That would show them he meant business. He watched the charring of the hull spread in the two places the Liberator had been hit.

"Reload and prepare to fire. Boarding party at the ready."

Inside the Liberator, Blake was confused. Suddenly, the place where he had been sitting was moving. A shock wave travelled all over the ship. Blake couldn't understand it. He watched in fascination as the tray carrying the cups full of green liquid fell to the ground in front of him. His feet were wet. He put his hand down into the fluid and lifted it to his mouth. He licked it. Mmmm, that was nice. If only he could get some more.

He cupped his hand into the pool of liquid on the floor and brought it to his mouth. There was none on the palm, but there was a lot on the back and he licked it dry. He felt his mind beginning to work. That was no way to get liquid from the floor to his mouth. If he wanted it, he'd have to lick it. He leant forward, put his mouth close to the pool on the floor and began to lick. He tasted the sweet green liquid. It was nice. It seemed to make him want some more. He kept on licking and his mind began to clear.

What was he doing on his knees? What was he doing licking up a strange green liquid from the floor? He looked around him as the memories began flooding in. His whole crew were lying curled up on the floor. Vila was whimpering like a baby. Blake's mind went back to the creature in the hold.

"There's nobody alive in there. Send the boarding party out." Travis looked triumphantly at the still motionless Liberator.

At last he had done it. Despite their superior craft, he had tracked them down. He watched closely as the androids made their way through the darkness of space towards the super-ship. If it was a disease that had incapacitated Blake and his crew, the androids wouldn't be so susceptible. If something had taken control of their minds his androids would be able to resist it.

Travis felt the unusual elation of total victory spread through his body until a dark shape on the underside of the Liberator caught his attention.

"What in heaven's that?"

Travis increased the magnification on his screens.

"So that's what killed them off – some kind of space monster."

He watched as his androids approached the Liberator. The creature was probably of low intelligence. His men could deal with it if they could not avoid it.

Travis watched as his androids spread out round the Liberator's entrance hatch. The creature was close, but it seemed to be paying them no attention. One of the

androids tried to open the hatch. He was unsuccessful. He drew his pistol and began firing at the hatch.

Immediately the creature sprang into action. He lunged towards one of the androids and Travis saw the android's suit deflate. Another android opened fire on the beast, but it wasn't harmed. It snapped once, twice, three times . . . and suddenly there were four lifeless spacesuits drifting aimlessly round the Liberator.

"Get that beast!" Travis gave his crew ten seconds to adjust their sights.

"Fire!"

The blasts missed the creature, but they struck home on the hull of the Liberator. The creature turned, sniffed at the gaping holes in the Liberator's hull and nudged the huge craft. There was no response.

Blake was almost back to his normal self. He asked Zen to provide more of the antidote and then he studied the damage. The power-boost was shot and so was the gravitational control.

"Zen, get us out of here."

The ship rocked as Travis's attack hit home. Zen's lights flashed on and off in a manner Blake had never seen before.

"Zen, can you get us out of here?"

Zen's lights flashed once again. Blake noticed that two of them kept flickering as if there was a faulty contact somewhere inside the intricate wiring of the computer.

"AUTO-NAV INOPERABLE. SUGGEST MANUAL CONTROL."

Blake gazed helplessly at the five bodies curled up on the floor. He struck his thigh with his fist and cursed. It was useless. He would have to wait for the tray full of antidote to materialise. There just wasn't enough time.

Travis was watching the creature with increasing alarm. After disposing of the androids and inspecting the Liberator's hull, it was gliding backwards and forwards in front of the craft, moving smoothly through the vacuum of space with slight movements of its body. Every now and then it would stop completely and stare at Travis's ships.

Travis knew he had to kill the monster, whatever it was. He couldn't enter the Liberator while this thing was alive and drifting round the hatchways.

"Prepare the torpedo."

As his androids prepared to fire the deadly weapon, Travis looked calmly at the screen. One shot should finish this space monster off, so long as it didn't move too suddenly.

"Torpedo ready."

"Fire!"

Even as he spoke the word, Travis saw the monster duck downwards and head towards his ship. The torpedo sped above the monster and crashed into the side of the Liberator. The monster, undeterred, kept on closing.

As soon as the tray had come out, Blake had fed the antidote to his crew. They were still in a daze when he told them to man their stations.

"This time it's for real. If you can't crack it, we're dead."

Jenna, Cally, Vila, Avon and Gan moved slowly into position.

"Course set for Eklos. Speed: time distort five. Hit it!"

The hours of training paid off. Blake's crew, although working slightly slower than usual, set the Liberator into motion on an evasive course. Blake watched the screen as the monster attacked Travis's ship. The Federation men were bombarding it with electricity and neuronic exploders, but it still kept on attacking. As the Liberator took off and the scene faded, Blake remembered the last picture he had seen: that of the monster, badly wounded, hardly able to function, throwing itself in front of the Beta-blasts Travis had aimed at the Liberator.

"Eklos here we come."

Blake turned to see Vila happily scanning the navigational chart screen.

"That's right – and we've got a baby's love for its mother to thank for it."

Vila looked puzzled.

"What's that, boss-man?"

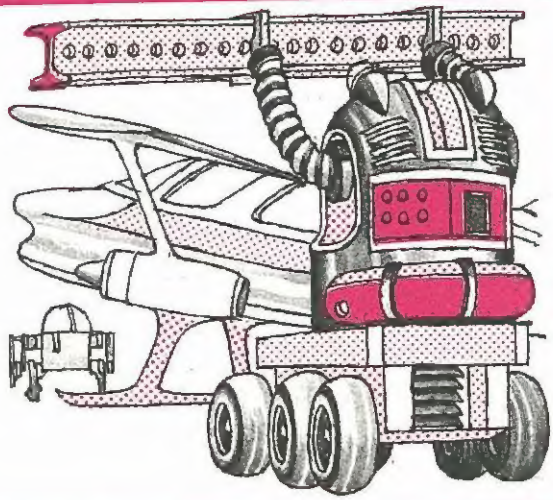
"Never mind."

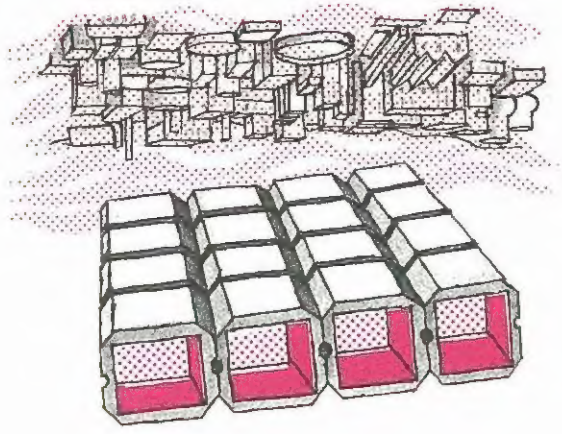
Blake's Wonders of the Universe

Roj Blake would be the first man to admit that there are many more things in the universe than his mind could conceive of, but there are some sights he has seen that have literally stunned him with their magnificence. Here are the seven startling phenomena that have impressed him most to date.

The carved planet is one and a half times the size of earth. Found in regular orbit in the uninhabited Breelacken solar system, the carved planet has been fashioned by some alien intelligence into a replica of a humanoid skull. The surface of the carved planet is extremely smooth and the way the core has been removed and the absence of debris suggests that the planet was brought there. How or why the carved planet was created is a mystery.

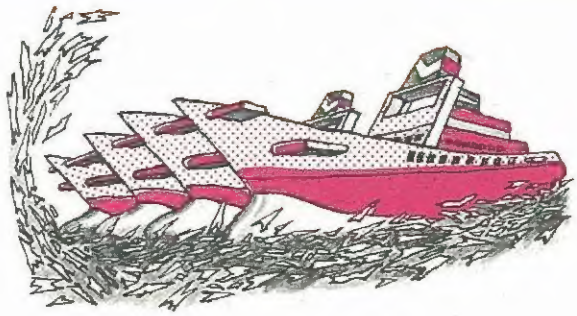
Farrn is a miracle of robotic technology. An isolated planet in the outer reaches of the Cramel solar system, Farrn is a planet bustling with activity, but containing no life as we actually know it. Inhabited entirely by self-maintaining robots, the inhabitants of Farrn live an orderly, if seemingly meaningless existence, building roads, boats, planes and repair centres. They work constantly, powered by self-generating light motors. Study of these motors is impossible as the robots of Farrn self-destruct when interfered with in any way.

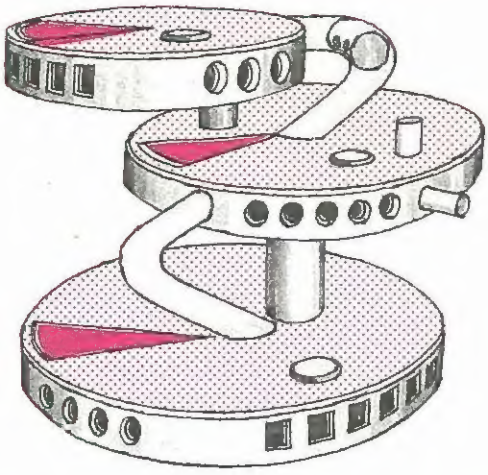




The flying city of Moob is a masterpiece of gravitational control. Hovering one mile in the air above the long-polluted surface of Moob, the flying city has no visible means of propulsion or support. It is built of sixteen interlocking pieces that can be changed round at a flick of the master switch in the Central Control building. Unfortunately, the flying city is not big enough to accommodate more than seven million people, and thousands of millions of others have to live and die on the flesh-rotting atmosphere of Moob itself.

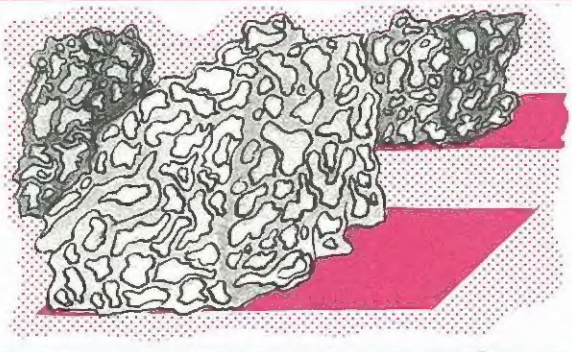
The dry sea of Voxx defies the imagination. Consisting entirely of tiny slivers of the glass-like Voxxia, the dry sea is subject to the same laws of gravity as earth's oceans. The two moons of Voxx mean that the dry sea has tides, and strong Voxxian winds mean waves far larger than the largest ones on earth. This does not stop the Voxxian people from crossing the dry sea in their long, interlocked, multi-hulled ships.





The time-farms of Zinglat are a stunning example of scientific progress without responsibility. These lavish centres were built by the Zinglatts soon after they had discovered time manipulation. The Zinglatt plan was to send squads of men into the past to harvest the giant Megasaurs that had become extinct billions of years before. The people ate well for a time, but their humanoid appearance quickly began to alter. Zinglatt cut off all communications with other worlds and when the first expedition reached there, one hundred years later, the planet was deserted, with the immaculate time farms standing as mute monuments to the dangers of rash experimentation.

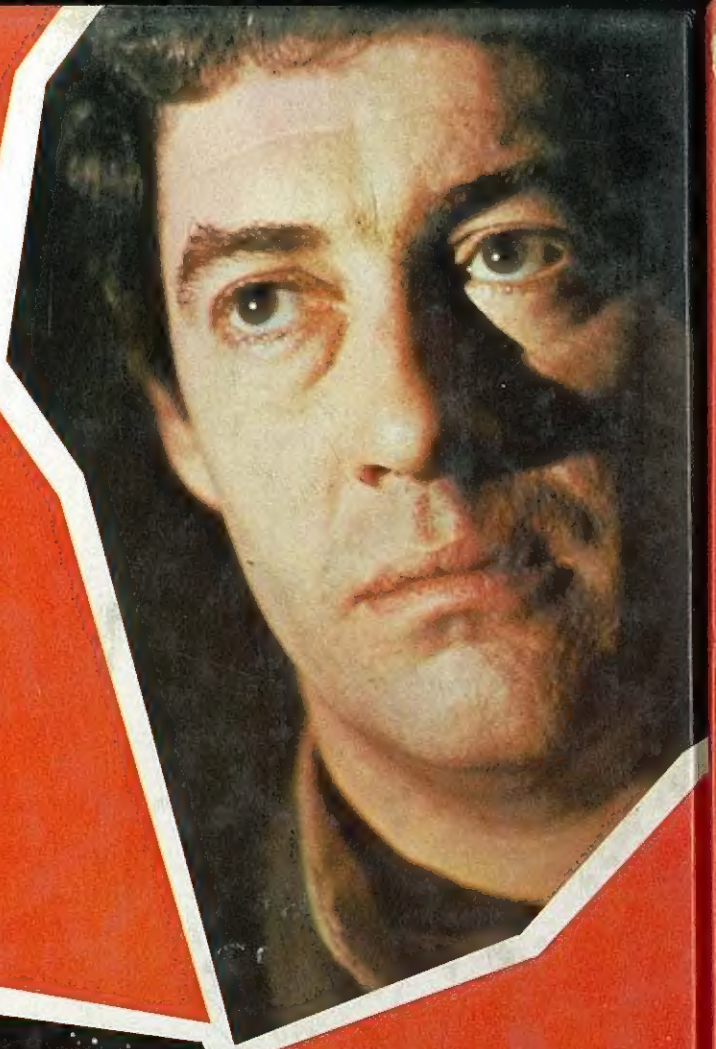
The underwater gardens of Milltoh almost made Blake want to abandon his fight against the Federation and just sit and gaze at their beauty. So great and varied were the colours contained in the gardens that visitors had to be fitted with special helmets to increase their colour receptivity range. The gardens were almost destroyed when the leaders of Milltoh started planting brain manipulation units in the helmets, an underhand act that sparked off a violent revolution on Milltoh.

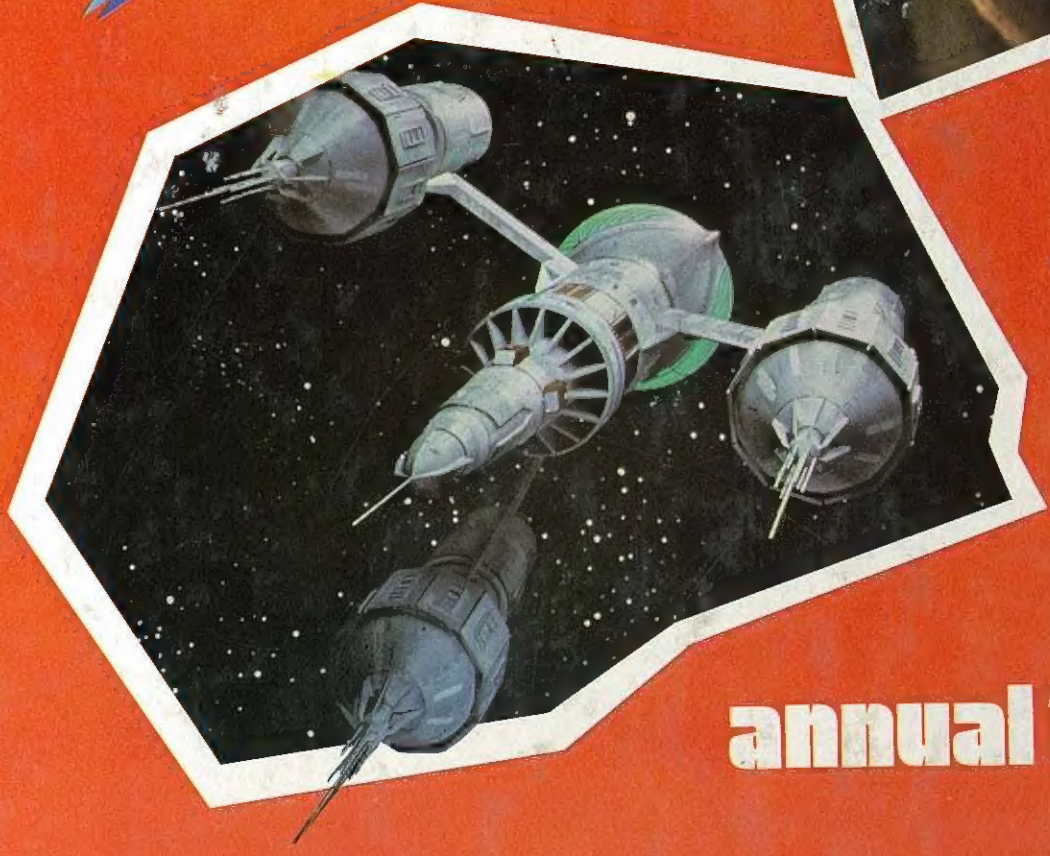


The checked desert of Sandria is unique. Covering the whole of the central landmass of Ibbra, the desert looks like a giant chessboard when seen from orbit. On Sandria itself it can be seen as a series of spongelike shapes placed in regular rows. These shapes are light sensitive and change their shape in accordance with the position of the sun so that the shadow they cast is always a perfect square.

Terry Nation's

BLAKE'S 7





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